Christian Religious Themes and Symbolism in Contemporary Piano Music: A Study of Selected Works by Two Korean Women Composers

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CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS THEMES AND SYMBOLISM
IN CONTEMPORARY PIANO MUSIC:
A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS BY TWO KOREAN WOMEN COMPOSERS

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ABSTRACT

Religious topics and themes have been represented in classical music literature throughout history. This treatise considers Christian religious themes expressed in two selected piano works by Korean composers: *Talitha Cumi* by Won-Jung Lee and *Via Dolorosa* by Eunseon Yu. It reveals how each composer represented Christian values, biblical stories, and religious concepts through their own musical languages. Essential elements of the music and the composers’ intentions are examined through style analysis in conjunction with my personal interviews with the composers. They are discussed alongside aspects of biblical symbols and meanings behind the music and the biblical stories with which the pieces are associated. Through this analysis, performers can more accurately and sensitively interpret and express the deeper meanings in these pieces and guide listeners’ experience of the music.
INTRODUCTION

In the Western classical music repertoire, we can find numerous examples of musical symbolism representing Christianity, such as the use of the "cross" motive in Bach’s *Art of Fugue* and Sinfonia in F Minor, as well as the settings of chorales by Bach and other German composers. The biblical sonatas of Kuhnau, Liszt’s use of cross motive, three-note motive, and plagal cadences in his piano works, and hymn tunes in Charles Ives’ First Piano Sonata also show religious elements.¹ In contemporary music, however, what kinds of compositional techniques are used to represent Christian values and biblical stories? What new sounds have become possible that can effectively express religious elements? What kinds of extended techniques are used to convey religious scenes or depict religious symbols through musical means? This treatise considers these questions and demonstrates how Christian values and biblical stories are represented in two selected solo piano works through musical style analysis.

This treatise focuses on two solo piano works based on Christian religious stories and themes—*Talitha Cumi* and *Via Dolorosa*—composed by two different Korean composers, Won-Jung Lee and Eunseon Yu, respectively. Won-Jung Lee is a composer who bases her compositional identity on her Christian belief system. Her musical pursuits focus on the embodiment of biblical topics and Christian values through music. *Talitha Cumi* is based on the passage in the Gospel of Mark 5:40–41 in the New Testament, which relates the story of a miracle Jesus performed by raising a girl from the dead. Lee used musical symbolism to represent Christian values and the religious elements of the story. The piece is based on thematic

pitch materials that are introduced at the beginning and are transformed continuously, creating musical flow. Eunseon Yu does not identify as a Christian but I commissioned this piece and collaborated with her on its composition. Many of her works have featured mixtures of musical cultures and styles, as well as the combination of popular styles and concert music through the use of both traditional and extended instrumental techniques. *Via Dolorosa*, or “Way of Suffering” in Latin, is based on Jesus’s final days: his suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection. Yu used innovative extended piano techniques, musical borrowing, and symbolic gestures to evoke Jesus’s journey to the cross.

This treatise aims to contribute to the discussion of contemporary piano literature among pianists and music scholars and to promote greater accessibility to these two relatively unknown piano works. Lee and Yu have crafted their own musical languages to depict biblical scenes and religious elements by manipulating texture, rhythm, harmony, and extended techniques of the contemporary period. Musical style analysis and discussions with the composers are used to reveal religious symbolism and biblical meanings in the music and to provide programmatic and expressive interpretations for performers. Musical style elements examined include harmony, rhythm, dynamics, pitch, tempo, timbre, texture, and structure. As I am studying the music of living composers, little research has been published on them. Information about the composers and their creative intentions come through my own interviews with the composers.

**Survey of Literature**

In order to support analysis of contemporary piano works influenced by Christianity, previous researches on sacred elements in keyboard music will show how Western classical composers represented religious topics or elements in their music. One useful dissertation, “The
Sacred Element in Piano Literature: A Historical Background and an Annotated Listing” (1974) by Richard C. Shadinger, covers the sacred element in solo keyboard literature throughout music history, including contemporary music.² The author discusses composers who were influenced by Christianity and interested in expressing their religion in music. His study deals with various composers from many different countries, including Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Portugal, England, France, Russia, the United States, Canada, England, Finland, Austria, and Hungary. One limitation of this thesis was that it is difficult to find detailed information, as the author did not provide specific excerpts or explanations that reveal where and how the religious elements are shown in music. Despite this, it was a useful resource for showing music that contains religious elements in piano literature.

Miya Choi’s doctoral dissertation, “Christian Piano Art Music: Its Theological Significance and Categorized Repertoire,” suggests convincing criteria for categorizing Christian piano art music.³ The author categorized Christian piano art music into four types; (1) works using hymn or chorale tunes, (2) works related to the Bible, (3) works expressing Christian faith symbolically, and (4) abstract works dedicated to God. Chapters two to five focus on revealing the theological significance of Christian art music based on the Bible. Chapters six through nine deal with the repertoire of Christian art music based on four categories with musical examples, which reveal where Christian influences appear in the pieces. Choi also provides a brief discussion and stylistic analysis of the pieces. This dissertation offers a look at valuable piano solo repertoire related to the Christianity in different categories. It is also significant because the

The author discusses relatively unknown contemporary pieces from East Asia, including those by composers Sung-Hee Joo, Myung Whan Kim, and Shinuh Lee from South Korea.

Another helpful dissertation by David E. Gifford titled “Religious Elements Implicit and Explicit in the Solo Piano Works of Franz Liszt” (1984) discusses elements that make specific works of Franz Liszt religious. To find religious elements in Liszt’s music, the author picked four musical traits: tonality, cross motives, three-note motives, and plagal cadences, which are traditionally used in music influenced by Christianity. This resource was useful for understanding musical elements traditionally used to suggest religious elements.

In her thesis “Meaning in Piano Music with a Religious Theme: a Philosophical and Historical Approach” (2001), Melinda Lee Hickman analyzed four piano works, each from different historical periods, that include religious elements. In analyzing these works, she focused on six primary modes for deciphering musical meaning: musical pictures, widely accepted musical conventions, topics, idiosyncratic symbolism, theories of expression (especially as proposed by Deryck Cooke and Peter Kivy), and meaning as a function of structure. These modes are not equally applied in each work, but the author examined how these modes of musical meaning are used in combination. Her discussion of various, detailed means of expression, theories, and modes are useful references for analyzing music with religious elements.

Max Stern’s *Bible & Music: Influences of the Old Testament on Western Music* (2011) addresses the narrative of the Bible told through music. This book’s research begins as far back as...
as George Frederick Handel’s English oratorio *Israel in Egypt* and extends to Andrew Lloyd Webber’s pop-rock musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. In chapter fifteen, Stern discusses Johann Kuhnau’s keyboard sonata, “The Battle between David and Goliath” (1700). The author provides the script from the Bible on which this piece is based, biographical information on the composer, the text and context of this piece, and musical exegesis. Stern also describes in detail how various musical elements are used for depicting certain environments or moments in the story.

Through this survey of literature, I was able to find musical symbolism and religious elements related to Christianity in classical piano music of the past. Based on this research, I explore how Lee and Yu embodied the biblical story and Christian values in their music, and I consider if they have found new possibilities for expressing and symbolizing religious elements within a contemporary musical idiom.

**Chapter Overview**

This treatise is divided into two chapters. The first chapter introduces Won-Jung Lee, her interest in Christian values and biblical topics, and her compositional style characteristics. It then turns to *Talitha Cumi* and, through analysis of musical style and axis theory, examines how Christian values and religious elements are embodied in the music.

The second chapter introduces Eunseon Yu’s background and experiences, her compositional traits, and her interests in diverse cultures, nature, and extended techniques. It then provides a style analysis of *Via Dolorosa* to show how musical elements and extended techniques are used and manipulated to depict the biblical story.
CHAPTER 1

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN WON-JUNG LEE’S TALITHA CUMI

Won-Jung Lee’s *Talitha Cumi* is based on a miracle Jesus performed during his ministry. Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead by saying “Talitha Cumi,” which translates as, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” This biblical story is important to Christianity because it signifies the love of Jesus, his faithful response to his people, and his authority over death. Lee’s music additionally conveys Jairus looking to God to heal his daughter. Using symbolic intervals, pitch materials, textures, rhythms, and harmonies, Lee references the Trinity, the love of Jesus, the faith of Jairus, and the sickness of the girl. In addition to musical symbolism, Lee uses the axis system formulated by Ernő Lendvai to transform simple thematic pitch material into various harmonic timbres, demonstrating her distinctive compositional language. Understanding the symbolism and deeper meanings will help performers interpret this work with the appropriate expressive intentions.

**Won-Jung Lee: Biography and Compositional Style**

Won-Jung Lee (b. 1970) is known for her devotion to Christianity, a devotion that is heard in her music, which consistently reflects Christian values, Biblical stories, and religious elements. Originally from South Korea, Lee earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in composition at Heidelberg-Mannheim University of Music and Performing Arts in Germany. She was the youngest person to win a prize at the International Composition Competition under the sponsorship of Schiedmayer & Sohne. She has developed her career through a variety of
professional experiences and her success is demonstrated by the awards and honors she has received.

After returning to South Korea in 1996, she taught as a lecturer at several universities, including Chongshin University, Pai Chai University, Korea Baptist Theological University and Seminary, Younghan Theological University and Seminary, Changwon National University, and Yeoju Institute of Technology. She also wrote music prolifically while serving as the exclusive composer for the Seoul Tutti Ensemble and as an adjunct professor at Chongshin University. Later she became the first person to receive a doctoral degree in composition from Seoul National University in South Korea. She has served at the Daegu International Contemporary Music Festival as a committee member, the Korean Church Music Composer’s Association as an executive secretary, and the Chongshin Contemporary Music Academy as a music director. Currently, she is an assistant professor in composition at Chongshin University in South Korea and is actively composing music based on her Christian faith.

During her studies in Germany in the early 1990s until 2005, Lee was influenced by the avant-garde music of Western Europe. She focused primarily on composing atonal and experimental music like musique concrète, commonly associated with Helmut Lachenmann. However, Lee questioned if this was her style of writing. She was eager to establish her own identity and musical language as a composer and concluded that her music should reflect what she values in life. One of these important values was her Christian faith. She began to study the Bible intensively and read theology books in order to gain deeper knowledge. Since then biblical topics and themes have directly influenced her compositions, such as *Noel* for soprano, clarinet, and piano and *Psalm 24 ‘Who Is the King of Glory?’* for recorder, guitar, harpsichord, viola and
violentello. Lee believes the most important aspect of Christianity is an understanding of Jesus Christ, and this has been the most significant influence on her music.

Lee’s new compositional direction was accompanied by a substantial change in musical style. Her early compositional traits were based on Western Europe avant-garde music but she thought it would be difficult to express Christian topics with purely atonal or noise music. Also, she thought contemporary music had become difficult to understand and less approachable for audiences. She wanted to compose music that was accessible and enjoyable for broader audiences. In her opinion, the diatonic triad is the closest musical material to the natural sound that God has given us, since the first five notes of the overtone series (C, C, G, C, and E) constitute a major triad; therefore, diatonic triads serve as the basis for many of her compositions.

Although Lee chooses triads and diatonic intervals as her basic material, she does not follow the expectations of traditional functional tonality. Instead she emphasizes variety of color, harmony, and atmosphere, manipulating and combining the basic pitch material to create tonal, modal, or momentarily atonal sounds. She intentionally studied contemporary works of Eastern Europe, United States, and Asia in order to broaden and expand the possibilities of her musical language. Lee believes that what matters most in composition is the method of treating musical elements, not necessarily what elements are used; that is where creativity lies.

This chapter highlights three significant features of Lee’s compositional approach that are evident in *Talitha Cumi*: the emphasis on biblical topics that underscore Christian values, the embodiment of Biblical stories through musical symbolization, and formation through expansion and transformation from simple thematic elements.
Talitha Cumi

*Talitha Cumi* was commissioned for the Korean-Chinese Composer Exchange Concert in Beijing on May 8, 2014. The concert was held on the Korean holiday called Parents’ Day; Lee dedicated the piece to her father, who was hospitalized at the time due to a stroke. The piece is based on the account of Jesus’s miracle in Chapter 5 of the Gospel of Mark. Lee included the verses at the beginning of the score:

> 40 And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was. 41 Taking her by the hand he said to her, “Talitha cumi,” which means, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.”

The story takes place in Capernaum, where Jairus, a synagogue ruler, approached Jesus when his twelve-year-old daughter was at the point of death and pleaded for him to heal her. At that moment, people from Jairus’s house arrived to tell Jairus that his daughter had already died. Overhearing them, Jesus told Jairus, “Don’t be afraid, only believe.” Though it seemed death had conquered and hope was lost, Jairus chose to believe. He led Jesus to his house where they found relatives and friends weeping. Jesus assured them she had not died but was only sleeping. While the mourners scoffed at him, Jesus took Jairus, his wife, and three of his disciples to the girl’s room. He took the girl’s hand and said to her, “Talitha cumi”; the girl immediately rose and walked.

This particular story resonated with Lee’s desire for her father’s healing. Jairus’s love for his daughter reminded Lee of her father, who always prays for her. In my interview with Lee, she expressed that her intention for this piece was to not only share the story of this miracle with

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7 Mark 5:40-41 ESV  
8 Mark 5:36 ESV  
9 Mark 5:41-42 ESV
others but also to convey both Jesus’s compassionate response and Jairus’s faith. Thus there are four main topics she sought to portray through the music. Three of them are directly related to the story—the love of Jesus, the faith of Jairus, and the illness of Jairus’s daughter—and the other, the Trinity, was chosen because it is at the core of Christianity.

Although *Talitha Cumi* is based on a narrative, Lee did not compose this piece in a traditional narrative format. Instead, she condensed the story into a single image and soundscape. Rather than depicting a chronological series of events she wanted the events and the characters’ states of mind to undergo juxtaposition and layering in the composition. For instance, Lee believes Jairus would have naturally had complex feelings of doubt and fear even though he believed in Jesus. Therefore, she conveys multiple emotions in one passage. In addition, she incorporates other underlying elements to fill in the narrative as she understands it. The implied presence of Satan, for instance, seeking to tempt people and disturb God’s work, is suggested together with the other aspects of the narrative; they coexist in different layers of the musical texture.

**Musical Style Analysis**

In this section, the four topics or musical symbols related to the narrative in *Talitha Cumi* will be examined through the lenses of melody, harmony, rhythm, and texture. In addition, I will discuss how Lee used the axis system to expand the range of timbres and harmonies with a limited number of pitch materials. Lee intentionally avoids using traditional forms in her music.¹⁰ Motivic pitch materials introduced at the beginning lead the entire piece and are continuously transformed, creating musical flow. She starts with a simple musical idea, like the

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¹⁰ Won-Jung Lee, Interview by Yujin Na, Email, December 5, 2018.
perfect fifth, then develops and varies it in many ways, including expansion and transformation, but she maintains the original motivic material from the beginning to the end. As a result, it is best to approach the analysis of this piece as a progression of pitch materials rather than trying to impose upon it a traditional form.

**Four Musical Symbols**

The Trinity

The Trinity is a core concept in Christianity and refers to one God who exists as three distinct Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Lee used numerical elements throughout the piece to symbolize the Trinity. The numerical symbols for the Trinity are revealed through triads, three-note chords, rhythms of triplet units, and a three-layered texture. In mm. 1–9, for example, the musical texture is comprised of a top chordal layer, a middle voice, and a bass line, which is like a pedal point (Example 1.1). In each layer, triplets and three-note chords are used to further suggest the idea of the Trinity.

This three-layered texture should be performed similar to how multi-layered texture pieces of Claude Debussy are performed. Each layer should exude a different color of sound. Using sensitive pedaling that allows for bringing out different harmonies and experiences of each layer is required for an effective performance.

The three-layered texture appears in other places in different arrangements. In Example 1.1, the layers are presented distinctly in their own registers. However, in other places, the three layers intermingle; the middle layer is written with either the top or the bass in the same staff using bass and treble clefs alternately (Examples 1.2 and 1.3). Three-note chords and triplets are also used in these passages to symbolize the Trinity. In these cases, emphasizing the rhythmic
patterns with accents and running sixteenth triplets is more important than differentiating the color of each layer.

Example 1.1. *Talitha Cumi*, Three-layered texture, mm. 1–9

Example 1.2. *Talitha Cumi*, Three-layered texture, mm. 48–49

Example 1.3. *Talitha Cumi*, Three-layered texture, mm. 120–121
Love of Jesus

Lee incorporates the interval of a perfect fifth (D–A) throughout the piece to symbolize the love of Jesus, which is described in the Bible as a perfect and faithful love (Examples 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6). The consonance and stability of the perfect fifth provides a ground for the rhythmic and harmonic tension that is also part of the soundscape. The other reason Lee chose the perfect fifth interval of D–A is to elicit a neutral affect. She uses the root and fifth without the third to avoid the major or minor association, while also allowing her to allude to the D Dorian mode.

Example 1.4. *Talitha Cumi*, Perfect Fifth Motive 1 (D–A), mm. 1–3

Example 1.5. *Talitha Cumi*, Perfect Fifth Motive 2 (D–A), mm. 25–26

Example 1.6. *Talitha Cumi*, Perfect Fifth Motive 3 (D–A), mm. 31–32

The perfect fifth is also used as a pedal point in a manner suggesting church organ music. It appears in different pitches as well, including E-flat–B-flat, F–C, A-flat–E-flat, and G–D
(Examples 1.7, 1.8, and 1.9). The stability and purity of the perfect intervals is often complicated by a variety of other harmonies, including dissonant ones. Nonetheless, the open fifths resonate throughout the piece and reinforce the main motive on which the music is based, reminding listeners of God’s relentless love and faithfulness.

Example 1.7. *Talitha Cumi*, Perfect Fifth Motive 2, mm. 60–62

Example 1.8. *Talitha Cumi*, Perfect Fifth Motive 3, mm. 150–152

Example 1.9. *Talitha Cumi*, Perfect Fifth Motive 4, mm. 168–170

The piece closes with a chorale-like section marked “religioso.” Here Lee presents the perfect interval motive in a simple texture without the previous harmonic dissonance and rhythmic complexity. On top of the perfect fifth motive in the left hand, a Gregorian chant-like
chorale tune is presented in the right hand, representing the purity and holiness of Jesus (Example 1.10).

Example 1.10. *Talitha Cumi*, Crystallized melody in the form of a chorale, mm. 216–232

The chorale melody is actually presented earlier in the piece; however, this is the first time it appears in its entirety. Previously it appears in the form of dispersed notes interrupted by other voices and accidentals, and sometimes the melody is suggested in chordal contexts rather than as a single melodic line (Examples 1.11 through 1.15). Since the melody is presented in different ways, it can be interpreted that the melody appears in the form of variations throughout the piece. The dispersed notes are crystallized in the form of the chorale at the end.

Traditionally, a motive appears at the beginning and variations follow, but in this piece, the composer places the original melody at the end. The listener must experience the journey through harmonic tension, complex textures, and dynamic climaxes before arriving at the
simplest, purest form of the melody, which in this case is also its fullest expression. This is reminiscent of Johann Sebastian Bach’s chorale structure. The realization of the melody and the sudden contrast in texture evokes the experience of reverence in praising God after hardships and turbulence in life.

Example 1.11. *Talitha Cumi*, Melodic Motive 1, mm. 84–87

Example 1.12. *Talitha Cumi*, Melodic Motive 2, mm. 93–97
Example 1.13. *Talitha Cumi*, Melodic Motive 3, mm. 100–105


Example 1.15. *Talitha Cumi*, Melodic Motive 5, mm. 138–140
In addition to using the perfect fifth motive in its pure form, Lee also transforms the motive to convey additional ideas. The first transformation is the seventh chord containing the perfect fifth. After a dissonant passage evoking the sickness of the daughter in m. 37, the musical character and expressive tone change in m. 39. Before, the perfect fifth pedal point is presented consistently despite its varied figurations, registers, or pitches. Beginning in m. 39, however, seventh chords containing the perfect fifth interval—the E-flat major-minor seventh chord and the C minor seventh chord—create a more turbulent atmosphere (Example 1.16). These seventh chords serve two purposes. First, the change from the pure, resonant sound of the perfect fifth pedal point to a richer acoustic sound is drastic. Thus, there is a change in color and character. Secondly, the dissonance of the seventh chord functions as a device to escalate conflict. Thus, this passage maintains anxiety, instability, and tension through the seventh chords, even though the perfect fifth interval is a constant. Through these transformations, the seventh chords simultaneously imply spiritual conflict. Therefore, these chords should be understood through multiple layers of meaning.

Example 1.16. *Talitha Cumi*, Motivic transformation to 7th chords, m. 40

The second transformation is the expansion of the perfect fifth interval to create chords of stacked fifths. For example, in m. 120, the interval E-flat – B-flat is combined with B-flat – F
These three pitches appear not only as perfect fifths, but also as perfect fourths. In the process of creating the chord of two combined perfect fifths, the composer inverts the perfect fifths to perfect fourths. According to Lee, the intention was to represent a religious atmosphere. More specifically, she evokes the sound of medieval organum with its parallel fourths and fifths.

Faith of Jairus

The faith of Jairus is symbolized by the pitches and chords that show directionality toward the pitches of the perfect fifth motive (D-A) that represents Jesus’s love. As these pitches and chords in the upper and middle voices lean toward the perfect fifth, they represent Jairus’s desperate will to grow his faith in Jesus in a time of uncertainty.

The composer uses directionality more broadly as a method of leading from one idea to another in order to mirror the narrative process in this musical context. In functional harmony, all half-step relationships can be viewed as having directionality.\(^{12}\) In other words, chromatic pitches can be considered to have directionality similar to that of a leading-tone. For instance, in a Neapolitan sixth chord the supertonic (the second scale degree) is altered to have a stronger directionality toward the tonic through flattening of the second, making it a half-step above the tonic. Augmented sixth chords, including the French, German, and Italian sixth chords, also have a strong directionality towards the dominant through half-step relationships. For example, the French sixth chord in C major is comprised of A-flat, C, D, and F-sharp. These pitches have a strong tendency to resolve to the dominant (G, the fifth scale degree). Lee uses them to enhance directionality toward the dominant. As a result, the augmented sixth chords complete the level of harmonic tension through the cadential function; the harmonic tension leads to the dominant chord and the dominant chord resolves to the tonic.

In *Talitha Cumi* Lee uses this half-step directionality to represent Jairus’s act of faith in moving toward Jesus. The chords with directionality toward A and the pitches with directionality toward D appear in the top chordal layer and the middle voice, respectively, within the three-layered texture. Lee emphasizes the half-steps around these two pitches. Example 1.19 shows the relationships between the chords with directionality toward A, as conceived by the composer.\(^{13}\) They are restructured for clarity; some chords contain enharmonic spellings of pitches.

The first set shows the A-flat major seventh chord progressing to the A half-diminished seventh chord with an added major ninth by moving up a half-step, which occurs in mm. 7 and 32 (see Example 1.20). The second set shows the chords having a directionality through the

\(^{12}\) Won-Jung Lee, Interview by Yujin Na, In-person meeting, January 30, 2020.

\(^{13}\) Won-Jung Lee, Interview by Yujin Na, Email, December 5, 2018.
movement of a half-step down. The B-flat minor triad with a raised seventh note progresses to
the E-flat augmented triad with an added fourth. This occurs in mm. 10, 19, 24, and 27 (Example
1.21).

Example 1.19. *Talitha Cumi*, Restructured chords having directionality towards A

The third set shows a slightly different case since the lower voice moves a whole step
down from the B to the A, rather than moving down a half step. The set’s first chord is the
French sixth chord in the key of A but is voiced differently. While the French sixth chord is most
commonly built on the second scale degree of A and in the second inversion (F-A-B-D#), the
French sixth chord used here is not inverted, but is in its root position (B-D#-F-A). The second
chord is a polychord combining A minor and E minor chords. Since this French sixth chord has a
tendency to resolve to the key of A, there is a sense of directionality toward A. Moreover, D-
sharp and F in the French sixth chord are resolved to E in the next chord, showing a
directionality of half-step relationship (Example 1.22). The last set also shows the chords in a
leading-tone relationship by a half-step down. The B-flat major seventh chord is led to the E-flat
augmented triad with an added fourth through the half-step interval between B-flat and A (mm.
12 and 14; Example 1.23). Although not all of the chords resolve to A as in the examples above,
the tension of the half-step relationship is implied and the sense of directionality is maintained.
Example 1.20. *Talitha Cumi*, Chords with directionality towards A (1), m. 7

Example 1.21. *Talitha Cumi*, Chords with directionality towards A (2), m. 19

Example 1.22. *Talitha Cumi*, Chords with directionality towards A (3), mm. 10–11

Example 1.23. *Talitha Cumi*, Chords with directionality towards A (4), m. 14
The pitches that have directionality toward D are presented in the middle voice of the three-layered texture. Lee created directionality by locating the pitches a half-step above or below D. Example 1.24 shows the line. The pitches with directionality toward D are circled (C-sharp and E-flat). These pitches contribute to the middle voice’s drive toward D.

Example 1.24. *Talitha Cumi*, Pitches with directionality towards D

The half-step relationship is also emphasized by the bass line (Example 1.25). The resonance of the D and A pitches in the pedal point provides a foundation for the directionality in
both the middle and top voices. Since the middle voice, in particular, does not resolve to D, its resonance with the D in the bass maintains the tension in the half-step relationships.

Sickness of Daughter

The sickness of the daughter is symbolized by dissonances made by combining major and minor seconds. In m. 37, the right hand is comprised of block chords and the left hand is comprised of arpeggiated triads (Example 1.26). While the left hand plays augmented triads, the right hand plays major triads, then passes through one minor triad and arrives at an augmented triad at the end. In a view of vertical harmony, the interval between the roots of the chords of both hands is a minor second except for the last chords. All of these elements create clashing dissonant sounds that represent the girl’s sickness.

Example 1.26. *Talitha Cumi*, Dissonances symbolizing the sickness of the daughter, m. 37

This passage can be interpreted in an additional way. As Lee explained in our conversation, the change from the consonant triads (the major and minor triads containing the perfect fifth) to the dissonant triad (the augmented triad containing augmented fifth interval) in the right hand symbolizes the conflict between the idea of the love of Jesus and the idea of the
sinful human nature and Satan’s temptation. In this way, the music expresses additional theological concepts of the Christian faith that underlie the narrative.

**Axis System**

In *Talitha Cumi*, Lee uses the axis system to expand the range of timbres and harmonies. In the context of traditional tonality, certain chords can be substituted for one another; for example, the submediant chord can replace the tonic to create a deceptive cadence.14 Hungarian music theorist Ernő Lendvai proposed an extension to this and created the axis system through his analysis of Béla Bartók’s music. The axis system focuses on the relationship of chords and tones through substitution in the traditional sense and beyond. Bartók’s musical language demonstrates the axis system where chords and tones are substituted by intervals of minor thirds and tritones. In Lendvai’s theory, Bartok’s chromaticism is explained within a tonally functional model.15 The axis system found in Bartok’s music reflects his expansion of tonal possibility, and Lee used this system to create various colors of sounds with simple pitch materials.

In *Talitha Cumi*, the axis system is formed by applying the centric pitch D. As shown in Figure 1.1, the axis system contains the twelve tones in a circle arranged in equidistant intervals according to the circle of fifths. For example, if the piece’s centric pitch D is set as a tonic (T), the fourth note, G, becomes the subdominant (S) and the fifth note, A, becomes the dominant (D). As a result, D-A-E-B-F#-C#, which is the circle of fifths beginning on D, becomes the formation which corresponds to the functional series, T-D-S-T-D-S. In this way, if we assign the

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15 Ibid.
repeating cycle of subdominant-tonic-dominant to each member of the circle of fifths, it forms the overall axis system.¹⁶

In the axis system, each of the twelve tones has a counterpart. Furthermore, each pair has a tritone relationship and serves Tonic, Dominant, and Subdominant functions. As shown in Figures 1.2 through 1.4, four tones comprise each of the following axes: Tonic axis, Dominant axis, and Subdominant axis. Each axis has two branches: a primary branch and a secondary branch. Chords that have D, F, G# (=A♭), or B as the root have a tonic function; chords that have D# (=E♭), F#, A, or C as the root have a dominant function; and chords that have C# (=D♭), E, G, or A# (=B♭) as the root have a subdominant function. The four notes in each axis should be understood in a functional relative relationship with each other and they are able to substitute for each other without changing the function.¹⁷

![Figure 1.1. Talitha Cumi, Axis system based on the centric pitch D](image)

¹⁷ Ibid., 19-21.
As in the common-practice system of tonality, harmonic tension is increased as the music progresses towards the dominant axis, and as the music progresses towards the tonic axis the tension is released. Lee used the axis system in order to provide a sense of harmonic tension and relaxation without using traditional chord progressions. The axis system allows for a greater variety in sound color and additional possibilities for harmonic progressions.

Figure 1.2. *Talitha Cumi*, Tonic axis

Figure 1.3. *Talitha Cumi*, Dominant axis
Figure 1.4. *Talitha Cumi*, Subdominant axis

The Axis System Applied in *Talitha Cumi*

The triad chart Lee provides in the score contains chords selected from the tonic and dominant axes, which are those used most frequently in *Talitha Cumi*. From all the possible chords of the axis system created on the D centric pitch, the composer selects chords using her intuition and by considering the color of sounds (Example 1.27). There are many possibilities for chord substitutions. In the axis system, the function of the chord is determined by the root note and thus both major and minor triads can be used freely.

The following examples show how the axis system is applied in *Talitha Cumi*. The triad chart below will help to understand the analysis. In mm. 32–33, the passage moves between the perfect fifth motive, D – A, and the transposed version, A-flat – E-flat, which is a tritone above the original. Through the application of the axis system, this harmonic progression, which has a tritone relationship, is interpreted as having a tonic function. Regardless of mode (major or minor), a chord with D, F, A-flat, or B as the root functions as a tonic chord and these roots are
able to substitute for each other. Therefore, this chord progression moves between the same functional chords but sounds unconventional because of the tritone relationship (Example 1.28).

Example 1.27. *Talitha Cumi*, Triads based on the axis system used in *Talitha Cumi*

Example 1.28. *Talitha Cumi*, Passage where the D – A perfect fifth motive is transposed to the A-flat – E-flat perfect fifth motive by the tritone relationship of the axis system, mm. 32–33

The passage in m. 34 also presents a chord progression with a tritone relationship. The A minor chord moves to the E-flat major chord, and the E-flat major chord moves to the A major chord (Example 1.29). All three chords belong to the dominant since the dominant axis includes the chords that have D# (=Eb), F#, A, or C as its root. Therefore, A minor, E-flat major, and A
major chords in this measure have the same dominant function. A similar example occurs in m. 40 (Example 1.30). Even though different chords are used in each hand—E-flat major-minor seventh chord in the right hand and C minor seventh chord in the left hand—both are dominant chords in the axis system.

Example 1.29. *Talitha Cumi*, Tritone relationship of the axis system. A minor – E-flat major – A major, m. 34

Example 1.30. *Talitha Cumi*, E-flat major-minor seventh chord and C minor seventh chord: Axis dominant, m. 40

In mm. 72–75, the axis dominant chord, an E-flat major-minor seventh chord with an added dissonant A, moves to the axis tonic chord, the D-A perfect fifth motive. As the passage progresses from the dominant to the tonic, it provides the sense of tension and release (Example 1.31). In m. 76, the chords in the right hand move from D minor to A-flat major to A major, with the D-A perfect fifth motive in the left hand (Example 1.32). From the perspective of the axis
system, the chord progression in this measure is the tonic moving to the dominant on top of a tonic pedal point. Using the axis system, Lee is free to express harmonic tension and release without using the traditional tonal system. Thus she expands the possibility for simple thematic material to be transformed into various harmonic timbres.

Example 1.31. *Talitha Cumi*, Passage where the axis dominant (E-flat major-minor seventh chord + A pitch) moves to the axis tonic (D – A perfect fifth movie), mm. 72–75

Example 1.32. *Talitha Cumi*, Axis tonic (D minor and A-flat major chords) and the axis dominant (D major) on the tonic pedal point (D-A motive), m. 76

**Conclusion**

In *Talitha Cumi*, Christian values and Biblical topics are represented through Lee’s musical symbolism. The story of the miracle Jesus performed by raising Jairus’s daughter from the dead communicates his love and the faith of the believer. The four main topics, or elements of Christianity, were depicted by specific musical elements and numerical symbols. Triads, three-note chords, rhythms of triplet units, and a three-layered texture convey the idea of the
Trinity; the perfect fifth interval symbolizes the love of Jesus; the directionality of the pitches and chords towards the perfect fifth motive represents the faith of Jairus; and the dissonant chords suggest the sickness of the daughter.

The axis system was also used to transform the simple thematic pitch material into various timbres. This transformation technique gives the music a sense of tension and release and creates an overarching musical flow. Understanding the musical symbols and meaning behind the music helps performers enhance their interpretations and convey the composer's musical and religious intentions for specific passages with expressiveness.
CHAPTER 2

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN EUNSEON YU’S VIA DOLOROSA

Eunseon Yu’s *Via Dolorosa* evokes programmatic events of Jesus’s final days, including his suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection, through her innovative extended techniques and expressive musical language. *Via Dolorosa* means “Way of Grief,” “Way of Sorrow,” or “Way of Suffering” in Latin. It refers to a processional route in the old city of Jerusalem on which Jesus was led, carrying his cross, to Mount Calvary for his crucifixion. The events of Jesus’s final days are among the most significant to Christians since they demonstrate God offering humanity eternal life through the sacrifice of Jesus. This chapter examines formal structure, extended techniques, and melodic and motivic characteristics, including the borrowing of a hymn tune “It is Well with My Soul,” in *Via Dolorosa* in order to illuminate religious symbolic elements and musical imagery that convey the programmatic elements of this significant biblical story. It also provides the background for each section and programmatic and performative interpretations to help pianists approach this piece with a deeper understanding.

**Eunseon Yu: Biography and Compositional Style**

Eunseon Yu (b. 1993) is an active composer in the United States who has written music in a diverse range of styles and mediums. She is fascinated by the different sounds of various cultures and many of her pieces represent this interest in blending different styles or cultural traditions, including jazz, European concert music, and Asian and Latin traditional music. Most recently, she was commissioned to write a piano quintet incorporating folk tunes that originate from each of the quintet members’ cultures.
Stylistic diversification in her compositions is influenced not only by her pursuit of a comprehensive array of genres and styles and flexibility as a composer but also by her experience studying with different teachers since her undergraduate studies. While composing *Via Dolorosa* she was studying with Dr. Stephen Montague, who influenced her use of unconventional instrumental and compositional techniques. Her sources of inspiration are diverse, too, and she draws from her personal interests in extra-musical subjects at the time of composing. Pieces such as *A Squirrel in the Park* (2019) and *Multiverse* (2020) represent her fondness for animals and curiosity for space and time.

Eunseon Yu is currently pursuing her doctoral degree in composition at Florida State University. She earned her bachelor’s degree in composition-theory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and finished her master’s degree in composition at Florida State University. Her music has been performed across North America, Europe, and Asia by professional musicians and ensembles, including yMusic, the Oregon Wind Quintet, and the Eppes Quartet, as well as the Korean traditional instrumentalists of Sinakhoe. Her works have also been featured at music festivals and symposiums, including the Oregon Bach Festival, the International Composers Workshop in Cyprus, the FSU Biennial Festivals of New Music, The Piano Lunaire’s Composers’ Symposium, the NYsoundCircuit relaunch show, the OME New Music Festival, the CIA Symposium, and the FSMTA Conference.

*Via Dolorosa*

*Via Dolorosa* for solo piano was commissioned for my doctoral lecture recital in April 2019 at Florida State University. In October 2018 I began collaborating with Yu about the possibility of composing works based on religious symbolism and narrative. I suggested a
concept based on Jesus’s final days, including his suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection. We discussed topics such as the plot of the piece, the atmosphere and imagery in each section, and hymn tunes that could be used. Via Dolorosa was completed in February 2019 and premiered in April 2019 in Longmire Recital Hall at Florida State University.

According to the Christian biblical text, Jesus experienced betrayal, wrongful conviction, physical suffering, and ultimately death. His final days represent the completion of his mission prophesized by the Old Testament. After the Last Supper, Jesus was betrayed by Judas, one of his twelve disciples, and arrested by a crowd of armed men sent by the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders. When he was arrested, Jesus did not resist but was willingly put on trial since he already knew God’s will. His mission was to eternally save his nation. Jesus was taken to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor for trial. The chief priests and the crowds demanded to crucify him and Pontius Pilate sentenced Jesus Christ to death. Roman soldiers put a crown made by thorn branches on his head and mocked Jesus by spitting on him, stripping his robe, and striking his head with a stick.

The soldiers forced Jesus to carry a cross and walk from the judgment location to Mount Calvary where he was crucified. During his way to the Calvary, Jesus fell several times under the weight of his cross. When he finally arrived on Mount Calvary, translated as “place of the skull” from Latin, soldiers gambled for his clothes and crucified him on the cross. People scorned him, saying “If you are the Son of God, save yourself and come down from the cross!” While Jesus was suffering, he kept praying to his father, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Even though he was crucified by the people for whom he came to the world to

18 Mark 14:43 ESV
19 Matthew 27: 32-40 ESV
20 Luke 23:34 ESV
save, he showed his unending love until his death. Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”, and gave up his spirit. At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.\textsuperscript{21} After his death on the cross, his body was buried in a tomb, and he was resurrected on the third day. By defeating the power of death, Jesus proved he was the true Messiah and the Son of God. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to people, including Mary Magdalene and his Apostles, and commanded them, “go and make disciples of all nations.”\textsuperscript{22} After staying for forty days, he ascended into heaven.

We chose the title \textit{Via Dolorosa} for this piece because Jesus’s journey on the Via Dolorosa represents his sacrificial life. The title itself foreshadows the theme of Jesus’s suffering and invites listeners to engage with the story and envision the scene.

\textbf{Musical Style Analysis}

Based on Jesus’s final days, this piece is comprised of five sections: Way of Suffering, Jesus’s Prayer to God, the Crucifixion, His Death, and the Resurrection. Table 1 shows where each section is divided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>mm.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Way of Suffering</td>
<td>1–32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Prayer of Jesus</td>
<td>33–76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Crucifixion</td>
<td>77–99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Death</td>
<td>100–147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Resurrection</td>
<td>148–199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{21} Matthew 27:50-51 ESV
\textsuperscript{22} Matthew 28:19 ESV
Six extended piano techniques were used in this piece for evoking religious elements and biblical scenes. The program notes explaining these techniques provided by the composer are shown in Example 2.1. Yu created various extended piano techniques to represent the biblical scenes and religious symbols. In Example 2.1, the table shows how to perform the specific extended techniques. These techniques add to the dramatic atmosphere and are symbolic of each section’s religious themes.

Example 2.1. Performance Notes of *Via Dolorosa*
Way of Suffering

The Way of Suffering represents Jesus’s walk to Mount Calvary while suffering from carrying the cross. The opening begins with uncertainty and the suffering slowly becomes more severe. In the first measures, mm. 1 and 6, the composer indicates vocalizing a “ssh…” sound while muting the string of and playing the lowest C note (the muted note technique) to foreshadow Jesus’s suffering. These combined effects are foreboding. This section’s irregular rhythmic divisions and tempo rubato remove the sense of stability. This illusion of ametric rhythms evokes the scene of Jesus trekking Mount Calvary with arduous steps (Example 2.2).

Example 2.2. *Via Dolorosa*, Sense of ametric rhythms in the first section, mm. 1–7

The four-note motive contains C, C-sharp, E, and E-flat, rising and falling by half steps (Example 2.3). The following chromatic scalar motion precariously moves up and down with different rhythmic units and seems unsteady and unstable.
Example 2.3. *Via Dolorosa*, Motive of the first section, mm. 1–3

Example 2.4. *Via Dolorosa*, Various appearances of the motive, mm. 12–22
Yu manipulates the four-note motive in ways such as reordering of the pitches, changing of register, transposition and placing it in different textures (Example 2.4). In mm. 12 and 16, for example, the four-note motive (C, C-sharp, E, and E-flat) appears in a different order: E, E-flat, C, and C-sharp, but it still follows the thematic gesture created by the half steps, now in melodic inversion. In m. 18, the thematic motive is transposed up by an interval of a perfect fifth: G, A-flat, B, and B-flat. This transposed form of the motive also appears in mm. 22 and 23, transposed up by a major third: E, F, A-flat, and G. When this motive appears in the top notes of the fortissimo marked chords, it is more decisive as its rhythmic motion is sharpened in the shape of a grace note. The changes of rhythms, dynamics, and textures suggest that Jesus’s suffering and struggle intensifies as he gets closer to Mount Calvary. At the beginning, the motive portraying Jesus staggering is presented in a pianissimo dynamic with tempo rubato and fermata markings. But as the music continues, the motive gradually increases in dynamic, texture is thickened from single melody to octaves and chords, and rhythmic patterns of motive becomes more decisive and straight forward.

Prayer to God

The second section (mm. 32–76) represents Jesus’s prayer to God with borrowing of the hymn tune “It Is Well with My Soul” and manipulating pitches to create symbolic gestures. The hymn is used to depict Jesus’s endurance of all the agonies on the cross. The text of “It Is Well with My Soul” was written in 1873 by Horatio G. Spafford, a successful lawyer and businessman, after losing his four daughters in a ship accident. Shortly after the accident, Spafford left to meet his wife, and the captain of the ship revealed the location of where his daughters died. The moment they passed this spot, he was inspired to write this hymn of praise.
In the hymn, Spafford still praised God in spite of the tragic situation and wrote “When peace like a river, attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll; Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say ‘It is well, it is well, with my soul.’” As a Christian, Horatio Spafford knew that God is in control despite situations that are seemingly hopeless. No matter what he was suffering, he faithfully surrendered and obeyed God, understanding His purpose.

Example 2.5. Score of “It is Well with My Soul”
According to Matthew’s account, before being arrested by Roman soldiers, Jesus prayed, “My father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”\textsuperscript{23} He continued, “My father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”\textsuperscript{24} Jesus’s sufferings include being betrayed by his own disciple, carrying the cross, being crucified by people he came to save, and being forsaken by God. Because Jesus was not only God, but also human, he felt the same fears, sorrow, and pain as everyone else. However, Jesus endured all the hardships to save us. These lyrics well describe a person faithfully depending on God regardless of the situation, and reflect Jesus’s resolve and frame of mind.

In this second section of \textit{Via Dolorosa}, Yu borrows the first part of the chorus’s melody as a motive in the key of C major (Example 2.6). This motive consists of repeated G notes, which are a significant characteristic of the chorus’s melody and represent Jesus’s prayer. Before the second section, this motive appears early in mm. 26–32 and foreshadows the main motive of the second section. These early allusions are presented in the form of dyad and triad chords in the right hand with a downward chromatic scalar motion in the left hand (Example 2.7).

The second section begins with half-step tremolos in the low register as an accompaniment with the repeated G motive in the melodic line. This intensifies the power of darkness and evil forces attempting to defeat Jesus. However, this dark turbulence is halted by the lowest C, performed with a muted note technique and the vocalized “shh” (Example 2.8).

\begin{example}
\begin{music}
\begin{fftsystem}
\input{Example2.6.mus}
\end{fftsystem}
\end{music}
\end{example}

Example 2.6. Top two voices of the chorus excerpt from “It is Well with My Soul” in C major

\textsuperscript{23} Matthew 26:39 ESV
\textsuperscript{24} Matthew 26:42 ESV
Example 2.7. Appearance of the main motive of the second section in the first section, mm. 27–32

Example 2.8. *Via Dolorosa*, Beginning of the second section, mm. 33–40

Unlike the original hymn, which is in a major mode, the borrowed hymn tune changes its tonal color through the oscillation between the keys of C major and C minor by using the flattened third. The hymn tune itself symbolizes Jesus’s prayer while its re-contextualization in the minor mode helps evoke his sorrow and pain (Example 2.9).

This passage in mm. 41–54 is one of the most distinctive passages in the piece, as the pianist vocalizes the text “It is well with my soul” along with the repeated G motive. The voice part is borrowed from the soprano line of the original hymn, which expresses the prayer of Jesus.
In contrast, the piano part is comprised of a melody in the right hand and a melody in the left hand that are borrowed from the soprano and alto lines, respectively, of the original hymn. The composer creates conflict through contrary motion between the two hands by altering the piano part with accidentals. The lowered third (E-flat) in the left hand initiating a downward gesture depicts the power of the darkness and hardship surrounding Jesus, while the lowered sixth (A-flat) in the right hand with a rising gesture represents Jesus crying out to God and his battle against evil. This altered hymn tune disrupts the pure C major melody in the vocal line by creating dissonance.

Example 2.9. *Via Dolorosa*, Oscillation between C major and C minor of the borrowed hymn tune, mm. 41–54

The conflict embodied in the chromaticism and the contrary motion of the lines escalates starting in m. 54, displaying the intensified persecution of Jesus (Example 2.10). The rhythmic
drive increases, the dynamic gets louder, the register expands, and the texture thickens until a climax in mm. 69–71. The strong chords in the right hand maintain the upward gesture toward dissonant sonorities while the left hand remains stuck on a C pedal point even when it is surrounded by chromatic, descending scalar motion. The sustained pedal point falls a half step to B in m. 69, completely giving in to the contrary motion and providing the most powerful moment of tension.

Example 2.10. *Via Dolorosa*, Contrary motion between the right and left hand hymn tune melody, mm. 60–69
The closing passage of the second section, shown in Example 2.11, prepares for the crucifixion section. One can interpret this descending motion toward the lower register as the obedience of Jesus to follow God’s plan.\(^\text{25}\) Although he has the power to defeat evil and avoid death, he accepts the suffering and sacrifices his own life to break the chain of sin and death and

ultimately give his people eternal life. In the context of this understanding of the story, the downward motion suggests Jesus humbling himself and submitting his life to the greater purpose.

**Crucifixion**

The section beginning in m. 77 depicts the crucifixion of Jesus. It is an intense section in which all extended techniques introduced earlier are juxtaposed in succession. These seven different extended techniques, shown in Example 2.12, are used to represent specific imagery during the crucifixion.

Example 2.12. *Via Dolorosa*, Extended techniques featured in the third section, mm. 77–86, 88–90
In the first system, mm. 77–83, the pianist is instructed to hit random strings in the lowest register with a hand palm, hit any metal inside the piano, play a glissando with fingernails on the strings, and hit strings with fingernails, all of which creates a grave, terrifying atmosphere. In addition, there are indications to manipulate speed along with dynamics, which give the music dramatic tension through push-and-pull motions.

Example 2.13. *Via Dolorosa*, Extended techniques depicting Jesus’s crucifixion, mm. 94–98

After establishing the atmosphere, the situation escalates in mm. 84–89 to the moment of crucifixion through dense, crashing sonorities in the high register and tone clusters in the lowest register with a gradual crescendo from *pppp* to *fff*. Here, tone clusters represent heaviness, suffering, and struggle. The dull thud of the hammer is created in mm. 84–87 by the muted note technique on the ascending minor seconds G and A-flat in the bass. These elements increase the tension before the actual crucifixion occurs. In mm. 93–97, the act of nailing Jesus to the cross is evoked by the extended technique of hitting the wooden board under the keyboard with the palm (Example 2.13). In performance, this sound effect shocks the audience, arousing the imagination to hear and visualize the scene.

Some measures here are not divided by bar lines but are designated by the number of seconds the pianist should sustain the sound, such as c. 3” or c. 5” (Example 2.14). Yu allows the performer freedom with this cadenza-like passage and, as a result, it should be performed
with a sense of improvisation. In this section, the performer should focus more on conveying the emotions involved with Jesus’s crucifixion than on precision with the timing and pitches, as this is one of the most climactic moments in the piece.

![Example 2.14. Via Dolorosa, Measures designated by the number of seconds, mm. 77–83](image)

**Death**

The section that follows depicts the death of Jesus (m. 99–147). Yu establishes a four-note motive—B, D, C-sharp, E—that is harmonized by parallel perfect fourths (Example 2.15). The basic gesture of this motive consists of two minor thirds but, as it develops, major thirds are added. Beginning in m. 105, the motive is subjected to variations with relentless sixteenth notes and the phrase length is extended with a swirling motion consisting of major and minor thirds.

![Example 2.15. Via Dolorosa, Four-note motive of the fourth section, mm. 99–109](image)
Example 2.16. Via Dolorosa, Pentachord of B minor scale

The extended four-note motive traverses a pentachord derived from the B minor scale: B, C-sharp, D, E, and F-sharp (Example 2.16). As it develops, it is transposed to C-sharp minor in m. 110, E minor in m. 112, and C minor in m. 116. The incessant, undulating minor pentachords
evoke the grim, dark atmosphere of Jesus’s death. Through the development, the four-note motive functions as a driving force to accelerate the music’s intensity. The tension continues to build as the dynamic gets louder, the right hand moves into the higher register, the range between the hands broadens, and the motive is doubled by octaves in m. 116 (Example 2.17).

![Example 2.17. Via Dolorosa, Development of the four-note motive, mm. 108–116](image)

This passage expresses the rising tension as Jesus is dying. Once the people had crucified him, they divided his garments and mocked him by saying “Save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” and “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King
of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”26 The darkness and chaos of the scene is expressed through the accelerated development of the minor pentachord gestures and the tone clusters in the low register.

The section reaches its climax in mm. 120–125 (Example 2.18). The climax is marked fortissimo with the pentachord motivic passage in the left hand and the G suspended-fourth chords in the right hand. This suggests Jesus crying out to God before his death with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?)27 Descending quintuplets in the left hand are layered with a repetitive chord in the right hand that undergoes a shortening of rhythmic values in mm. 121–122 that drives the music forward. In mm. 123–125, the sound of the pianist striking the wood under the keyboard combined with the tone clusters convey that Jesus has died. The brief silence that follows emphasizes the dramatic moment.

Example 2.18. *Via Dolorosa*, Climax of the fourth section and his death, mm. 120–125

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26 Matthew 27:32-44, ESV  
27 Matthew 27:46 ESV
After his death, G pitches in the high register resonate like bells and the hymn tune “It is Well with My Soul” returns again. Having appeared in fragments earlier in the second section, the melody of the refrain is finally presented in its entirety (Example 2.19). This symbolizes that Jesus’s mission has been completed through his sacrifice.

Example 2.19. *Via Dolorosa*, Reappearance of the hymn tune “It is Well with My Soul”, mm. 130–147

**Resurrection**

The fifth section (mm. 148–199) depicting Jesus’s resurrection begins with the muted note technique and the same four-note motive of the previous section in A minor. This motive,
consisting of ascending minor thirds and symbolizing darkness, is changed to ascending major thirds in m. 155 and the atmosphere shifts substantially (Example 2.20). This change to the major mode implies that the power of death has been defeated by the resurrection of Jesus.

Example 2.20. *Via Dolorosa*, Allusion of resurrection, mm. 148–161

In the Allegretto section that begins in m. 161, a rising major second becomes a thematic gesture to symbolize the resurrection. In fact, rising motion and the use of the whole tone scale,
which consists of major seconds, characterizes this section overall. In mm. 169–170, for example, octaves in the left hand ascend by whole steps. This rising motion in the bass line, moving through B-flat, C, D, E, F-sharp, A-flat, B-flat, and C, demonstrates the whole step transpositions and symbolizes Jesus rising from the grave. (Example 2.21).

Example 2.21. *Via Dolorosa*, Rising motion by whole-step depicting the resurrection of Jesus, mm. 159–170
After the climactic descending C major chords in m. 183, an interesting framework is found. From m. 186 to the end, the bass line descends (C, B-flat, A-flat, G), and ascends again (G, A-flat, B-flat, C). The larger gestures are the descending C to G and the ascending G to C. These pillars are filled with transpositions of major seconds but in the tonic (C) to dominant (G) framework.
Example 2.22. – continued
The rising motion is emphasized by repeated rising sequences that move through higher registers. Repeating crescendo dynamics also emphasize the rising motive, and tremolos further support the dramatic atmosphere of the resurrection. The piece ends with a jubilant finale that reemphasizes the rising major second motive with tremolos, ascending chords, and syncopated rhythms (Example 2.22). Various rhythms including a fanfare figuration (8th-16th-16th notes) and brilliant and virtuosic sixteenth sextuplets add to the triumphant and heroic effects here.28

Conclusion

Jesus’s death and resurrection are central to Christianity. Jesus died to save believers from their sins and he gave them eternal life by overcoming the power of death through resurrection. Eunseon Yu used extended piano techniques to embody his suffering and to express the extreme scene of his crucifixion. She borrowed the hymn “It Is Well with My Soul” to symbolize the prayer of Jesus. In addition to this symbolism, the hymn tune was also manipulated to depict the power of darkness and the battle against evil. Yu’s expressive musical language, including the use of diverse rhythmic patterns, innovative extended techniques, and symbolic gestures, is effective in projecting Christian religious themes. Through this analysis, performers can better understand and express the meaning of the piece.

CONCLUSION

The two biblical stories that inspired Won-Jung Lee’s *Talitha Cumi* and Eunseon Yu’s *Via Dolorosa* convey significant values of Christianity. These stories communicate the love of Jesus, Christian faith, and Jesus’s sacrifice to save his people through his death and resurrection. Through musical style analysis, this study demonstrated ways these religious elements have been expressed in contemporary piano works. In *Talitha Cumi*, Won-Jung Lee used numerical symbolism, directionality, and motivic and harmonic features to depict general Christian values and the four main topics of a miracle story. In *Via Dolorosa*, Eunseon Yu employed diverse rhythmic motion, innovative extended techniques, borrowing, and symbolic gestures to project Christian religious themes.

Both works present innovative sound structures and timbres that embody religious ideas. In *Talitha Cumi*, the three-layered texture, in which each layer symbolizes different concepts, and the transposition following the axis system create the mysterious atmosphere of the miracle Jesus performed. The distinctive timbres within Lee’s unconventional treatment of tonal elements help convey the concepts of spiritual conflict, the power of evil, and sickness. In *Via Dolorosa*, Yu’s use of extended techniques, including tone clusters and striking the body of the piano, help depict aspects of Jesus’s suffering and crucifixion. Both composers experimented with creating new sounds within their personal musical languages to portray specific imagery related to the stories.

While neither composer follows the traditional tonal system, they also do not fully embrace atonality. Instead, in these pieces they use a centric pitch to maintain a sense of tonality,
often in order to express a holy atmosphere or the idea of faithfulness, and also to broaden harmonic possibilities and create unique musical color.

Although both composers use musical symbolism to suggest Christian religious elements, Lee’s method is more abstract while Yu’s method is more explicit. In *Talitha Cumi*, Lee created symbolic meaning using simple pitch material. Transformation of the thematic motive primarily drove the music. She considered the story as a single image and soundscape; therefore, she layered the musical expression of events, characters, states of mind, and values. As a result, these elements are expressed through a multi-layered texture, intertwined with each other, and sometimes transformed to emphasize symbolic meaning or express different aspects of the story.

On the contrary, Yu embodied the biblical story in *Via Dolorosa* through a more traditional programmatic writing approach. Gestures and extended techniques explicitly evoke and depict each event or change in atmosphere. In a way, Lee’s writing is more indirect, like a metaphor, and Yu’s writing is more direct, like a simile.

Many contemporary musical works are overlooked or ignored and are programmed much less frequently than traditional classical works. Many performers and audiences find contemporary music difficult to approach and appreciate since the aesthetic or meaning of the piece is not immediately obvious. In this respect, this treatise draws attention to contemporary works by two Korean women composers and sheds light on their musical symbols and meanings. It seeks to make these pieces and the work of these present-day composers more accessible to performers and listeners by explaining the music’s relationship to Christianity and the composers’ musical and religious intentions. Through my conversations with the composers and my analyses in this treatise, I provide performers a deeper understanding of this new music to guide their interpretations and listeners’ experiences.
WON-JUNG LEE

1. Could you tell me how did you began to compose music influenced by Christianity and your compositional style?

Lee: When I was studying in Germany, my compositional traits were based on Western Europe avant-garde music and I focused on experimental music like the concrete music of Helmut Lachenmann. While I continued composing in the style of German contemporary music, I was skeptical about making music in that way and wanted to find my identity as a composer. Through the time struggling to find my value and identity as a composer, I decided to reflect Christian values in my music as a Christian.

Since then, my compositional style was changed substantially. The first thing that a composer usually thinks about is musical elements. Noises were the main musical elements that I focused on in experimental music. However, I thought it would be difficult to express Christian topics and religious themes with noises. I thought triads which are based on overtones would be the closest sound to the one God gave us.

Basically, I use pitch materials which have a sense of tonality. However, I did not want to just reproduce the tonal music in the same way composers in the Classical and Romantic periods did. Therefore, I thought about “how to treat” these musical materials which are based on tonality. I researched contemporary works of Eastern Europe, United States and Asia. I found many contemporary composers who are using tonality as well as triads or modes, especially composers who are based in the United States. I concluded that what matters is how to treat musical materials not what materials are used for writing contemporary music.
I began to read the Bible more and meditate the scripture to make music reflecting Christian values. In my perspective, the Bible cannot be understood at once since the scripture is profound and contains infinite stories about the truth. I also think multiple things are intertwined in a single biblical scene, such as the complex psychological status of figures and spiritual elements. In Talitha Cumi, for example, I embodied not only the divinity and love of Jesus which he showed by reviving Jairus’ daughter from the dead but also Jairus’ will for growing his faith to believe in Jesus. I mean, even though Jairus believed in Jesus, there must have been many distractions, such as agony, grief, and conflicts in his mind, since he is a human like us. I even think there would be a presence of evil trying to interrupt the work of Jesus despite it not being described in the Bible. Therefore, all different biblical and spiritual elements are intertwined and embodied into one musical passage through multiple musical layering like polyphony. As I tried to express these multiple elements through the music, triads, the fundamental material of the music, are transformed into diminished or augmented chords from its pure sound as a device for depicting the conflict in the scripture.

All my compositions are usually based on triads but harmonies are not treated with the traditional tonal system. The simple motivic materials function as a foundation of the piece and they are developed and transformed, creating musical flow. It can be viewed as a minimalism since a simple pitch material is used as a motive of the piece but I do not see it as a minimalism. It is musical flow processed through consistent motivic pitch material and the pitch material is developed and transformed. I find extremely limited motivic pitch material and develop the music through the process of transforming it. The extremely simple material begins the music and is consistently maintained until the end but at the same time, the music shows many dramatic musical events within the simple thematic material.
Even though my pieces are based on the biblical story, I did not compose in a narrative way and there is no chronological order to the story. I see the biblical story as a single image and a single soundscape. Thus, I did not intend there to be a series of events in chronological order but those events or psychological status of figures are juxtaposed and overlapped simultaneously. For example, I think Jairus might have had doubt and fear inside of him when he met Jesus despite his faith. All these things, such as the love of Jesus, faith of Jairus, the sickness of the daughters, or even the presence of Satan trying to disrupt God’s work were coexisting simultaneously. To embody these coexisting things into music, a polyphonic texture is used as a necessity. So you can find the passage in *Talitha Cumi* where I represented the Trinity, the love of Jesus, and the faith of Jairus through a three-layered texture.

2. What inspired you to compose *Talitha Cumi*?

Lee: I dedicated this piece to my hospitalized father. I commissioned this piece for the Korean-Chinese Composer Exchange Concert in Beijing. While considering about what kind of piece I should write, I decided to compose a piece for my father since the concert date was the Parents’ Day in Korea. The church sermon given during the week I decided to compose the piece for my father was about Talitha Cumi. Usually, the Talitha Cumi story focuses on Jesus saving the child and his love but the pastor presented one more theme: the faith of Jairus, the father of the sick daughter. My father always prays for me. I believe I was led to God through his sincere prayer and it spiritually revived my dead soul. I thought the love of Jesus was needed for my sick father and I wanted to express my gratitude to my father through this piece.
3. Could you tell me why you used the axis system and how you applied the axis system in your piece?

Lee: First, I wanted to create a holy atmosphere by using modal color of sounds, so I started from Dorian mode color by using perfect fifth chord without the third. Another reason why I used the sounds of the Dorian mode color is the fact that Dorian mode has a neutral feeling by not giving any strong major or minor key sounds. I did not want to start from either a tragic or too bright an atmosphere but I wanted to begin the piece with a neutral atmosphere. Even though I did not use the actual Dorian mode scale, the perfect fifth motive, D-A, at the base line gives a modal feeling for listener. With that base line of modal color, other voice lines are layered to create polytonality sounds. By doing so, this piece creates various colors of sounds not specific to certain tonalities. This acoustic technique layering different colors of texture avoids simple progressions of limited pitch materials.

The table of the axis system I made for *Talitha Cumi* shows the most used chords in this piece. From all the possible chords based on the axis system, these chords are selected by my intuition and consideration about the color of sounds.

Basically, the axis system implies the harmonic function, such as tonic, subdominant, and dominant. Therefore, as the music progresses towards the dominant axis, it increases the harmonic tension, and as the music progresses towards the tonic axis, the tension is released.

This is why I used the axis system. I wanted the harmonic tension and relaxation without using the traditional tonal system. The axis system uses tonality but it is more open to the possibility of modification. The axis system enables various harmonic expressions while implying the tension-relaxation function of harmonic progressions. In *Talitha Cumi*, it is more appropriate to see it as
‘tension – relaxation’ not ‘harmonic resolution’ when the chord progression goes from dominant to tonic since I used it to emphasize the color of sound and not to for functional progression.

4. What do the chords and pitches that have directionality towards A and D mean?
Lee: In functional harmonic relationships, all half-step relationships can be seen as having directionality. In other words, chromatic pitches can be considered as it has a directionality like a leading-tone. For instance, in the case of a Neapolitan sixth chord, it is a chord that changes the supertonic to a leading tone-like note which has a stronger directionality towards the tonic. This directionality between a half-step is also found in augmented sixth chords.
This is the significant tool that I used in this piece to express the faith of Jairus. By using chords and pitches that have directionality towards the perfect fifth (D and A), which represents the love of Jesus, I can depict his will to grow his faith toward believing in Jesus.
Chords having directionality toward A should not always move to the aimed note. Sometimes, it moves to the chords containing A, and sometimes not. However, it still contains and implies its tension by having directionality.

5. Could you explain the chorale section at the end of the piece?
Lee: It represents a prayer of thanks to God. I wanted to close the piece with a chorale-like tune. The melody moving narrowly sounds like a Gregorian chant.
6. Could you explain measure 37, where intense dissonant chords are present?

Lee: It expresses the sickness of the daughter but at the same time it represents conflict of the Talitha Cumi story. Here, the dissonant and consonant harmonies can be seen respectively as symbols of human’s sin and love of Jesus or his forgiveness.

7. From measure 40, the perfect fifth motive changes to seventh chords and the music sounds like it enters a new section and changes its atmosphere. Could you explain if you had any specific intentions for this section?

Lee: There are two purposes for the seventh chord containing the perfect fifth motive. First, it provides colorful sounds to music. It is also a device to escalate conflict musically since the seventh chord is dissonant. So, it is used to arouse harmonic tension.

8. You said, you use the transformation technique to develop your motive. Where can I find its examples?

Lee: The seventh chords containing the perfect fifth motive was the one of the transformations. In addition, the transformation is found in mm. 120 and 132, where the perfect fifth motive is expanded. In the process of creating the chord of two combined perfect fifths, the perfect fifths are inverted to perfect fourths. I wanted to provide a holy and religious atmosphere by using chords made from fourths and fifths like the organums in medieval ages.

All perfect fifth chords can be understood as it refers the perfect love of Jesus. However, through its transformation, it also implies simultaneous spiritual conflicts by containing some dissonant pitches.
1. You used many kinds of extended techniques for this piece. Could you explain what kind of sound effect or timber you wanted to create with each extended technique, and what kind of image, scene, event, or atmosphere you were thinking while you compose with it?

Yu: The extended techniques that I used in this piece describe each scene both directly and indirectly. In the beginning section, I thought there needs some non-tonal effects to realize a mysterious and heavy atmosphere, so the techniques used at the beginning mostly contribute to forming such image. However, the ones in the middle, especially the section that describes crucifixion, represent the scene more directly to remind the audience of the actual sounds of nailing. I tried to find as many sounds as I can create from the whole body of the piano.

2. For your borrowing hymn tune, “It is Well with My Soul”, you did not use the hymn melody as it is, but you manipulated pitches and added minor mode to the hymn. And this hymn is presented partially but later this hymn tune is finally presented in its entirety in major mode. Could you describe what did you intend by manipulating pitches of the hymn?

Yu: I intended not to give the hymn tune straightforwardly at first. The moment that the tune is initially suggested is where the first section is transitioned to the next section where I did not want the introduction of the original tune to interfere the continuing mood. Instead, I meant to give a hint for the listeners, at least believers who would perceive the tune, to associate the tune with the music themselves. The manipulated pitches can be differently interpreted by listeners in a way that they accept them in the context.
3. In *Via Dolorosa*, I found rising and falling gestures are characteristic and outstanding, especially in the pitch manipulation for the hymn tune, “It is Well with My Soul” and in the resurrection section. Could you explain your intention for these gestures?

Yu: As this piece is intensively focused on the storytelling narrative, I tried to deliver the musical gestures in a more symbolic way rather than being more abstract. To me, the rising and falling gestures were the means to apparently show the contrasting moods between the initial oppressive section and the last resurrection section. These gestural contrasts are also paired with chromaticism and whole-tone based scales, respectively.
APPENDIX B
LISTS OF SELECTED WORKS

WON-JUNG LEE

• *Gethemane: Egony in The Garden* for String Quartet (2019)

• *Shouting: Hooray for Independence of Korea in Honor of March 1919* for Chamber Orchestra (2019)


• *Noel* for Soprano, Clarinet and Piano (2016)

• Suite for Clarinet and Piano *Jesus Christ* (2016)

• *Golgotha* (2015)

• *5 Variations on the Theme of 'I Can Hear My Savior Calling'* for Clarinet and Piano (2014)

• *5 Variations on the Theme of 'A Wonderful Savior Is Jesus My Lord'* for Clarinet and Piano (2014)

• *Seventh Angel, Seven Thunders* for Trombone and Piano (2014)

• *Talitha cumi* for Piano (2014)

• *For Unto Us A Child Is Born* (2012)

• *From the Sensory Garden* for Piano Trio (2011)

• *Walking in the Wilderness* for Piano (2011)

• *Rainy House, I Have Broken the Mysterious Flower* by Poem of Ryu Si-Hwa for Soprano and Piano (2009)

• Suite for Solo Violoncello *Thou Hast Turned for Me My Mourning into Dancing* (2009)

• Suite for Solo Piano *Shadow Doll Dance* (2005)
▪ *Emotional Expression* for 8 Players (2002)

▪ *Erinnerung* for 13 Players (1995)

▪ *Das Fenster* for Violin, Clarinet, Cello, Celesta and Percussion (1994)

**EUNSEON YU**

▪ *Mosaicism* for Piano Quintet (2020)

▪ *Multiverse* for Solo Piano (2020)


▪ *La Brisa de Cafeína* for Solo Guitar (2019)

▪ *Via Dolorosa* for Solo Piano (2019)

▪ *Groove Exotique* for Flute, Clarinet, Trumpet, Violin, Viola, and Cello (2019)

▪ *Au-ullim* for Flute, Clarinet, Bassoon, Haegum, and Geumungo (2018)

▪ *Muyong* for String Quartet (2017)

▪ *Three Bagatelles on a Reminiscence* for Piano (2017)

▪ *The Diagnosis* for Alto, Viola, and Piano (2016)

▪ *To Heaven* for Cello (2016)

▪ *To A Butterfly* for Mezzo Soprano, Flute, and Piano (2015)

▪ *Petite Concerto for Oboe and Bassoon* for Chamber Orchestra (2015)

▪ *Garak* for Flute, Violin, and Cello (2014)
28 May 2020

Won-Jung Lee
Chongshin University
143, Sadang-ro, Dongjak-gu,
Seoul, Republic of Korea

Dear Won-Jung Lee,

I am completing a doctoral treatise in piano performance at the Florida State University titled “Christian Religious Themes and Symbolism in Contemporary Piano Music: A Study of Selected Works by Two Korean Women Composers.” I would like your permission to reprint in my treatise excerpts from the following:

*Tatitha Cumi* (2015) for Piano

The music excerpts to be reproduced are:

mm. 1-9, 48-49, 120-121, 1-3, 25-26, 31-32, 60-62, 150-152, 168-170, 216-232, 84-87, 93-97,
100-105, 124-127, 138-140, 20, 120, 132, 7, 9, 10-11, 12-14, 4-9, 37, 32-33, 34, 40, 72-75, 76

If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated and return it to me at the e-mail address below. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Yu-jin Na
D.M. Candidate
Florida State University

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

Signature: ________________________________ Date: 29 May 2020

Printed name: Won-Jung Lee
28 May 2020

Eunseon Yu
2677 Old Bainbridge Rd,
Tallahassee, FL 32303

Dear Eunseon Yu,

I am completing a doctoral treatise in piano performance at the Florida State University titled “Christian Religious Themes and Symbolism in Contemporary Piano Music: A Study of Selected Works by Two Korean Women Composers.” I would like your permission to reprint in my treatise excerpts from the following:

*Via Dolorosa* (2019) for Piano Solo

The music excerpts to be reproduced are:


If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated and return it to me at the e-mail address below. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Yujin Na
D.M. Candidate
Florida State University

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

Signature: [Signature] Date: 05/28/2020

Printed name: Eunseon Yu

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Pianist and educator, Yujin Na was born in Seoul, South Korea. Her musical journey began when she started playing piano at the age of five. She developed her piano skills through attending one of the most prestigious art institutions, Sunwha Art Middle School and High School. Yujin earned her Bachelor’s degree at Ewha Woman’s University under Yunboh Jung and Kwiran Lee. Piano performance was not the only endeavor she pursued, but she also explored history and education during her college years. She completed courses in teaching and received teaching certificates in music and history. She graduated in 2015 Cum Laude, earning a double degree in Piano Performance and History.

In 2015, Yujin travelled to the United States to broaden her musical experiences. As a recipient of a full scholarship, she hold a master’s degree in piano performance and literature at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign under Dr. Ian Hobson and Dr. William Heiles. With a graduate assistantship, she earned her doctoral degree at Florida State University under Dr. Ian Hobson.

Yujin’s career achievements speak of her passion for music. She has been placed in several competitions including the Seoul National Symphony Orchestra Competition, National Students Music Competition, University of Illinois School of Music Concerto Competition, and the Illinois Summer Piano Institute Concerto Competition. She has also performed with various orchestras and chamber ensembles including University of Illinois Symphony Orchestra led by conductor Donald Schleicher and Sinfonia da Camera led by Dr. Ian Hobson. Her performance of Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat by Franz Liszt has been described as “succeeded well in her playing of the more declamatory passages, but more notable was her delicate soft touch in the lyrical passages. The exciting finale brought excited applause for Na, and on her second curtain
call, many in the audience were standing” by The News-Gazette Concert Review. Besides her interest in traditional classical repertoire, she devotes herself to promoting new music by actively working with several contemporary composers. Most recently, she commissioned and premiered *Via Dolorosa for piano solo* by composer Eunseon Yu.

Her volunteer activities reflect her steadfast dedication to serve the community through music. She has worked as an assistant instructor at Beautiful Mind Charity Orchestra in South Korea, helping students who have physical or mental disabilities in elementary to high school levels. She also toured five cities in South Korea to reach culturally isolated communities. Currently, she is doing outreach at a nursing home in Tallahassee, FL by giving concerts with a youth chamber ensemble every Sunday.