

The Choral Music of Hye-Young Cho

YOUNGEUN KIM

Hye-Young Cho (b. 1969) is a celebrated South Korean composer whose music is widely performed throughout the world. Her works have garnered international acclaim and have been commissioned and performed by major choirs in South Korea, including Incheon City Chorale, Ansan City Choir, and the National Chorus of Korea. She has composed over 160 works in a variety of styles and genres. The large majority of her output comprises choral works; however, she also has three solo vocal pieces and three instrumental works featuring traditional Korean instruments. Cho's choral compositions are shaped by the natural flow and nuance of the text, which enhances the clarity and sensitivity of her musical expression, and allows listeners to connect with the emotional content, regardless of the language. This close relationship between words and music creates a deeply moving experience that is both personal and universal.

Biography

Born and raised in Seoul, Hye-Young Cho began studying piano at the age of six. The church she attended maintained a strong music program that exposed her to Western classical choral music. Although she faced financial hardship and briefly questioned whether to pursue a career in music, she ultimately decided to follow her passion and earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees in composition from Hanyang University. During her time in college, she had the opportunity to conduct the Hanyang Glee Club and the adult choir at Mokyang Church; these experiences played a key role in shaping her interest in choral music.¹

After completing her master's degree, Cho composed in a variety of styles including con-

temporary and electronic music.² In 2006 she began publishing anthems for church choirs, and in 2009 a commission from the National Chorus of Korea led her to focus more fully on choral composition. In 2012 she received an award for her setting of “The Lord’s Prayer” at the Joseph M. Martin Composer Symposium in Atlanta. Two years later, her large-scale “Te Deum” for chorus and orchestra was commissioned and premiered at the opening concert of the 2014 World Symposium on Choral Music in Seoul. Her piece “Sae-no-ya” also was performed by the National Chorus of Korea at the 2023 ACDA National Conference.

Cho has served as composer-in-residence for the Incheon City Chorale, the Ansan City Choir, and the National Chorus of Korea. She served as president of the Korean Choral Composition Association (KCCA) from 2015 to 2018 and began serving again in that position in 2024. In this role, she has organized numerous symposia and concerts to support Korean choral composers. From 1999 to 2018, she served on the music faculty of three colleges, before making the decision to focus solely on composition. Her music is published by Walton Music, Santa Barbara Music Publishing, and MusicSpoke in the United States; Carus-Verlag in Germany; and J&A Music, KCM Alliance, J&C, and Choral21 in South Korea.

Korean Choral Culture

Choral music in Korea emerged primarily within church contexts and was shaped by Protestant traditions through the introduction of Western hymns by missionaries in the late nineteenth century. Today, church music still plays a significant role and remains important in Korea’s choral scene. In addition, South Korea has a unique ecosystem of choirs supported by both the national government and city governments. The country maintains one national choir and approximately seventy city-funded civic choirs, which are established to advance choral music and promote cultural engagement. The national choir and most of the civic choirs are professional. These ensembles hold regular concerts and perform at state and municipal events throughout the year. Cho has written a wide range of music for church choirs and for the national and civic

choirs, including both sacred and secular works.

Choral Works

Hye-Young Cho has composed over 160 choral works, including extended works; church anthems; over thirty original compositions; and over eighty choral arrangements of popular, folk, and art songs. Two of her extended works are sacred: “Te Deum” for chorus and orchestra—a single-movement work lasting approximately twenty minutes—and the unaccompanied *Mass for Double Choir* in five movements, with a duration of about thirty-five minutes. The other two are suites, each about fifteen minutes in length. The first, *Nocturnes* (2009), is a three-movement, unaccompanied choral setting of secular poetry by Jun-Ho Kwon. The second, *Lamentation* (2022)—subtitled “A Mother’s Song for Her Child Drowned in the West Sea”—reflects a mother’s sorrow over the loss of her child during the Korean War. Scored for SATB choir, string ensemble, and piano, this three-movement work also exists in a version for organ and piano. Cho has also composed over forty anthems to date, which have been sung in worship settings across South Korea. Her concert repertoire for choirs includes over thirty original works, most of which are settings of Korean poetry. In addition, she has arranged the following for choir: twenty Korean art songs, ten Korean folk songs, and fifty Korean popular songs. She also created a choral adaptation of Robert Schumann’s song cycle *Dichterliebe* for SATB choir and piano. This body of music includes both technically demanding concert works and arrangements of folk and popular songs designed to be more accessible to general audiences, demonstrating her ability to balance artistic depth with public engagement.

Several consistent features define Cho’s choral writing. Her textures frequently include antiphonal exchanges between voices, or between voices and piano, creating musical dialogue and a sense of spatial resonance. Melodies are lyrical and emotionally direct. Her works feature colorful harmonic language, including extended tertian chords, suspensions, modal colors, and cluster-like sonorities. She frequently includes virtuosic solo passages. Cho believes that the human voice is the most beautiful instrument, which is why many of her works are unaccompanied.³ Even in accompa-

nied pieces, she often includes unaccompanied sections and uses textures that resemble unaccompanied writing, such as sustained chords or single-line instrumental support. In all of her music, clarity and emotional depth remain central, serving both the expressive content of the text and the experience of the listener. Following is an introduction to Cho's concert works in three categories: choral settings of Korean poetry, arrangements of Korean folk and art songs, and works in non-Korean languages.

Choral Settings of Korean Poetry

Cho is perhaps best known for her emotionally resonant settings of both classical and modern Korean poetry. She gravitates toward texts marked by emotional restraint and lyrical subtlety. Much of her inspiration comes from the poetry, which she sets with great care, allowing the natural rhythm and emotional tone of the language to guide the music.⁴ She lets the shape of the text determine the pacing, and often uses *rubato*, *ritardando*, *accelerando*, and other flexible approaches to reflect natural speech. Text stress and syllabic flow are handled with great care. Cho frequently draws on the poetry of So-wol Kim (1902–1934), a writer often regarded as having most clearly captured the essence of *han*—a cultural sentiment of deep, unresolved sorrow shaped by collective history, loss, and longing. Cho's settings bring introspective and metaphor-rich texts to life, inviting performers and audiences into a shared emotional experience rooted in Korean cultural expression.⁵ All of the works in this category are in Korean. Both titles below are published in transliterated Korean, and MP3 pronunciation guides are available.

“Evocation” (*Mon-Nee-Joh*) was commissioned by the National Chorus of Korea in 2013. The Korean text is a setting of the poem “Mon-Nee-Joh” by So-wol Kim. Published in 1925 in the *Azalea Flower* collection, the poem speaks of painful memories and unresolved longing that persist despite the passage of time and efforts to forget. Since its premiere, this piece has become one of the composer's most beloved and widely performed works in South Korea. Scored for SATB or SSA chorus and piano, it is approximately five minutes in duration. The piano introduction establishes a reflective atmosphere through legato phrasing, flexible

tempo, and rich harmonic language. The texture is predominantly homophonic, with contrasting passages employing imitative and antiphonal writing. Although So-wol Kim's poem already includes textual repetition, Cho amplifies this feature through additional musical repetition, framing the work as a continuous emotional loop. Both the poem and the musical setting begin with the statement that forgetting is impossible, then shift in the middle to lines that suggest the possibility of forgetting. These middle passages are treated as transitional and harmonically unstable and are followed by a decisive modulation from D^b major to G^b major at the emphatic return of “Mon-nee-joh” (I cannot forget), which is reinforced by unison choral writing and expanded dynamics (Figure 1 on the next page). A brief unaccompanied passage marked “freely” introduces a moment of intimate reflection, and the work concludes quietly with a return to fragments of the opening material, avoiding full closure and leaving a lingering sense of reflection. “Evocation” combines emotional depth with poetic sensitivity, making it an accessible and effective choice for high school, university, and community choirs.

Another of Cho's works based on a poem by So-wol Kim is “Golden Field” (*Guhm-Jan-Dee*). Published in the January 1922 issue of *Gaebyeok* (a religious magazine), this poem is short and simple in form, yet lyrical and emotional. Its rhythm is shaped through the use of end rhyme, repeated words, and similar sentence structures. The poem conveys a deep sense of longing, contrasting the irrevocable loss of the beloved with the golden grass that returns each year at their gravesite.

Originally commissioned by the Seongnam City Chorus in 2017 and revised in 2018, the piece is scored for SSAATTBB chorus with four-hand piano and features optional parts for flute (or traditional Korean *daegeum*) and oboe (or traditional Korean *piri*). The piece opens with a tranquil, pastoral introduction by the flute/*daegeum* and piano, presented without a time signature to create a natural and unhurried atmosphere. Korean ornamentation (*sikimsae*) is employed in both the woodwinds and vocal lines, evoking the style of traditional Korean folk songs. While some sections feature static homophonic textures with subdued accompaniment, the piece is generally driven by a steady undercurrent of sixteenth-note piano figures that sustain

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43 *f* *molto rit.*
S Eeh-chee-oh - ri - da
A Eeh-chee-oh - ri - da
T Eeh-chee-oh - ri - da
B Eeh-chee-oh - ri - da

f *molto rit.* *ff*

Poco più mosso ♩ = ca. 76

46 *unis. ff*
S Mon - nee - joh
A *ff* Mon - nee - joh
T *ff* Mon - nee - joh
B *unis. ff* Mon - nee - joh

Poco più mosso ♩ = ca. 76

Figure 1. Hye-Young Cho, “Evocation” (Mon-Nee-Joh), mm 43–47.
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rhythmic momentum. In addition, the texture gradually thickens through vocal divisi, antiphonal exchanges, and imitative techniques. Expanding dynamics and increasingly colorful harmonies further heighten the emotional intensity (Figure 2 on the next page).

The use of the *Jungmori* rhythmic pattern—a traditional Korean twelve-beat cycle in a moderate to moderately fast tempo—further reinforces the folk-like character of the music, infusing it with energy through its dotted rhythms (Figures 3 and 4 on page 83). The piece concludes with a return to the opening material, bringing it to a gentle close. Running approximately five and half minutes, the piece balances interpretive challenges with accessible features like a short, repeated Korean text, making it well suited for advanced high school, university, and community choirs.

Arrangements of Korean Folk and Art Songs

Hye-Young Cho has arranged numerous Korean folk songs and art songs for choir. The source materials include traditional work songs, lullabies, lyrical folk melodies, and early modern art songs. She maintains the integrity of the original tunes and extends their expressive possibilities through artful choral writing. Melodies are set prominently in the soprano line or a solo voice and are supported by harmonies that complement the texture without overwhelming it. All the works in this category are in Korean. The first of the two works below is published with IPA, and the second is presented in transliterated Korean.

One of Cho's most dynamic folk song arrangements is "Ong-Hye-Ya," an unaccompanied setting commissioned by the National Chorus of Korea in 2009. Originating from Gyeongsang Province in the southern part of Korea, the folk song was traditionally sung by farmers during barley processing as a means of lightening physical labor and fostering a sense of unity. Set for SSAATTBB chorus with a tenor solo, the piece is approximately four and a half minutes long and follows a modified rondo form. The recurring refrain, which combines wordless interjections, alternates with contrasting episodes that musically depict various stages of the agricultural cycle—from planting and growth to harvest and communal celebration. The melodic mate-

rial is largely pentatonic, reflecting traditional southern Korean folk scales. The rhythmic foundation is a *Jajinmori* rhythmic pattern, a fast traditional Korean twelve-beat cycle that creates a driving and lively character.

While maintaining the original responsorial structure and basic melodic contour of the folk song, the composer introduces rhythmic devices such as syncopation and ostinato patterns, which contribute to the music's energy and forward momentum. As the piece progresses, the texture becomes increasingly layered through vocal divisi, solo lines, and extended harmonies, gradually moving beyond the boundaries of the original folk setting. This leads to a contrasting slower lyrical section. The passage evokes a gentle and intimate atmosphere, depicting a quiet moment between two neighbors engaged in friendly conversation. The final refrain reintroduces the main material with heightened musical intensity, featuring expanded vocal writing, syncopated interjections, and a soaring tenor descant. The work concludes with a Picardy third, transforming the modal A minor into a bright, celebratory A major. "Ong-Hye-Ya" is a compelling synthesis of traditional Korean folk elements and contemporary choral writing. The piece was published by Walton Music in 2024 and is especially well suited for advanced university choirs or experienced community ensembles.

"Go-Hyang-Eui-Bohm" (Spring in My Hometown) is a choral arrangement of a well-known Korean art song scored for SATB choir, soprano solo, and piano. The art song was composed in 1929 by Nan-pa Hong (1898–1941) and features a poem by Won-su Lee (1912–1981) that was written in 1926 during the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910–1945). Though often sung by children, the original song carries deep cultural resonance, evoking memories of home and a longing for a lost homeland. Commissioned by the Incheon City Chorale in 2018, Cho's arrangement preserves the original lyrical simplicity while expanding its expressive scope through rich choral textures and sensitive piano writing. The piece begins with the choir humming the melody on "oo," subtly suggesting the main theme of the art song. This opening also features extended harmonies, creating an expressive atmosphere. The soprano soloist then enters alone to sing the first verse of the original art song, after which the choir returns with gentle harmonic support.

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20

Fl. *cresc.* *mf*

Ob. *cresc.* *mf*

1 *mp* 3 *cresc.* *mf*
S Guhm - - - - - jan - -

2 *mp* 3 *cresc.* *mf*
Guhm - - - - - jan - -

1 *mp* 3 *cresc.* *mf*
A Guhm - - - - - jan - -

2 *mp* 3 *cresc.* *mf*
Guhm - - - - - jan - -

T *mp* 3 *cresc.* *mf*
3 Guhm - - - - - jan - -

B *mp* 3 *cresc.* *mf*
Guhm - - - - - jan - -

I *cresc.*

II *cresc.*

Figure 2. Hye-Young Cho, "Guhm-Jan-Dee" (Golden Field), mm 20–21.
Santa Barbara Music Publishing, © 2025. Reprinted with permission.

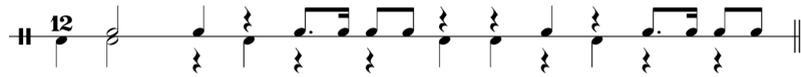


Figure 3. *Jungmori* rhythmic pattern, “*Jungmori-jangdan* (중모리장단)”
Korean Encyclopedia, National Folk Museum of Korea.

D *Moderato, not too fast* ♩ = ca. 92

31

Fl. *f*

Ob. *f*

S *f*
Boh - meeh Wat - nae Bohm - bee - chee Wat - nae

A *f*
Boh - meeh Wat - nae Bohm - bee - chee Wat - nae

T *f*
Boh - meeh Wat - nae Bohm - bee - chee Wat - nae

B *f*
Boh - meeh Wat - nae Bohm - bee - chee Wat - nae

D *Moderato, not too fast* ♩ = ca. 92

I *f*

II *f*

Figure 4. Hye-Young Cho, “*Guhm-Jan-Dee*” (Golden Field), mm 31–32.
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In the following section, the roles reverse: the choir carries the melody while the soloist adds a lyrical descant. A rising half-step modulation introduces the second verse, bringing richness and intensity that deepen the emotional arc of the piece. This verse concludes in a soft unison, leaving a lingering sense of unresolved longing. Cho's arrangement maintains the song's gentle, nostalgic tone while drawing out the poem's underlying sense of loss and yearning. The piece is published by KCM Alliance in Korea and is accessible for high school, university, and community choirs.

Works in Non-Korean Languages

While most of Hye-Young Cho's compositions are in Korean, she has also written and arranged works in Latin, German, English, and Spanish. These pieces explore themes of peace, loss, love, and longing. Composed in 2021, "Dona Nobis Pacem" was commissioned by the Incheon City Chorale and reflects the composer's longing for peace amidst uncertainty during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with the challenges

of preparing remote performances and questioning her ability to continue as a musician, she turned to this setting of the traditional Latin text as a way to find emotional grounding.⁶ Scored for soprano soloist, a small SATB group, full SATB choir, and violin, the work runs approximately six minutes. The choir primarily provides harmonic support, while the melodic material is carried by the soloist or the chamber ensemble, allowing for intimate and expressive moments (Figure 5).

The piece employs extended harmonies, including cluster-like sonorities, added ninths, and suspensions to accompany the soprano part, which includes wide leaps throughout the vocal register. In the middle section, chant-like solos for tenor, alto, and soprano appear in succession, creating a sacred and introspective atmosphere. In the final section, the violin and soprano soloist exchange melodic lines. The piece concludes on a major chord with an added second and an open sonority, creating a gentle, unresolved impression. "Dona Nobis Pacem" is well suited for advanced university choirs or experienced ensembles. The piece is published by MusicSpoke.

Espressivo, con anima ($\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 88\text{--}92$)

Soprano Solo
Do-na no - bis pa - cem. Do - na no - bis pa - cem. Do-na no - bis, do-na

Soprano
Mm, mm, mm,

Alto
Mm, mm, mm,

Tenor
Mm, mm, mm,

Bass
Mm,

Figure 5. Hye-Young Cho, "Dona Nobis Pacem," mm. 1–12. MusicSpoke, © 2026. Reprinted with permission.

Hye-Young Cho also has created an adaptation of Robert Schumann's song cycle *Dichterliebe* (*Poet's Love*) for SATB choir and piano. Commissioned by conductor Nam-Gyu Jung for the Wonju Civic Chorale, this work was premiered in 2013 in South Korea. Composed by Schumann in 1840, *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48, is a setting of sixteen selected poems from Heinrich Heine's *Lyrisches Intermezzo*. The cycle presents a complex emotional progression, from the initial elation of love to stages of sorrow, disenchantment, and ultimate resignation. In this arrangement, Cho carefully adapts Schumann's melodic lines and harmonies to create her choral setting. She retains the original piano accompaniment and derives the choral harmonies by drawing on the material embedded in it⁷ (Figure 6 on the next page). This approach preserves both the expressive character and the musical structure of the original work. Most of the choral writing is homophonic, with individual voice parts occasionally initiating the main melodic line or a solo voice leading the phrase. Cho's choral setting includes a solo movement for mezzo-soprano, two movements scored for SSA, and SATB movements that feature passages for either upper or lower voices alone. These varied textures and shifts in vocal color create subtle contrasts and expressive variety across the cycle. The full piece is about thirty minutes long.

Conclusion

Hye-Young Cho's choral writing reflects a deep sensitivity to both the musical and emotional qualities of the text she sets. Whether drawing from Korean poetry, folk melodies, Latin sacred texts, or Western art songs, she approaches each piece with careful attention to language, vocal texture, and emotional pacing. Her music balances accessibility with expressive depth, offering works that are both performable and artistically rewarding for a range of ensembles. Her works resonate widely with choirs around the world, transcending linguistic boundaries. As more of her music becomes available internationally, it offers ensembles not only beautifully crafted repertoire but also a meaningful way to engage with Korean musical traditions through choral expression. 

Additional Resources

Byun, Hyokyung. "New Korean Voices: Three Female Composers and Their Works" (DMA doc., University of Washington, 2021).

Kwon, Seung-ah. "Hye-Young Cho," in *Choral Repertoire by Women Composers*, edited by Hilary Apfelstadt and Alan Troy Davis (GIA Publications, 2025), 144–48.

Kim, Sowol. *Azaleas: A Book of Poems*, translated by David McCann (Columbia University Press, 2007).

Lee, Dong-Kyu. "The Sound of Korea: Twenty-First-Century Korean Choral Music" (DMA doc., The University of Alabama, 2021).

Lee, Mirae. "Byung-Hee Oh's Cantata *Light of the East: A Fusion of Western and Korean Musical Elements*" (DMA doc., University of Arizona, 2023).

NOTES

¹ Seung-ah Kwon, "Hye-Young Cho," in *Choral Repertoire by Women Composers*, ed. Hilary Apfelstadt and Alan Troy Davis (GIA Publications, 2025), 145.

² EditionKorea, "조혜영 Hye-young Cho."

³ Seung-ah Kwon, "Hye-Young Cho," 146.

⁴ Seung-ah Kwon, "Hye-Young Cho," 146.

⁵ Seung-ah Kwon, "Hye-Young Cho," 147.

⁶ KBS Classic FM, "Jung Kyung's 11 O'Clock Classic: Wednesday Interview with Composer Hye-Young Cho," *YouTube* (November 9, 2022), <https://youtu.be/g5D5dH2dWI4?si=eunSzIe8292-xZV9>.

⁷ Robert Schumann, *Dichterliebe*, arranged for SATB choir and piano by Hye-Young Cho (Carus-Verlag, 2025), 3.

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14 dan - - - do *p*
 S A Im wun - der - schö - nen Mo - nat Mai als
 T B Im wun - der - schö - nen Mo - nat Mai als

18
 S A al - le Vö - gel san - gen, da hab' ich ihr ge - stan - den mein
 T B alk - le Vö - gel san - gen, da hab' ich ihr ge - stan - den mein

22 rit - tar - dan - do
 S A Seh - nen und Ver - lan - gen.
 T B Seh - nen und Ver - lan - gen.

Figure 6. Robert Schumann, “Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,” No. 1 from *Dichterliebe*, arranged for SATB choir and piano by Hye-Young Cho, mm. 14–26. © 2025 by Carlus-Verlag Stuttgart - Carus 9.309. Reprinted with permission.