

Music, Math, and Mortality

BEIMFOHR-NEUSS LECTURE FEATURES DR. MIA CHUNG

By Zachary Lee, Cornell '20

On April 24, Chesterton House invited renowned pianist, educator, and performer Dr. Mia Chung to give a lecture entitled “Music, Math, and Mortality.”

The event was part of Chesterton House’s Beimfohr-Neuss Lectureship series, which began in 2011 to bring “public intellectuals to Cornell to address issues related to faith in a pluralistic society.”

To a crowded Sage Chapel, Chung explored the intersectionality between three disparate subjects, encouraging musicians and non-musicians alike to see the congruence of God’s created world. Music can be mathematical and math can be beautiful, and both

answer the salient questions of life and death. Throughout the night, Chung intermittently played various selections, making it a talk that engaged the heart as well as the mind.

The day before the lecture, Chung spoke to some students about her turbulent journey as a musician. During her undergraduate years, she believed her studies conflicted with God’s calling for her to be a performance musician. “Yet, as I look back on my time now, I can attest that God wastes nothing!” she exclaimed. “Do not think that God cannot use your passions or gifts in ways you do not expect. All He asks is that you are faithful.”

Chung graduated magna cum laude from Harvard, received her master’s from Yale, and earned a doctorate from Juilliard School. She was a first prize winner of the 1993 Concert Artists Guild Competition and recipient of the 1997 Avery Fisher Career Grant. Throughout the lecture, Chung was passionate about her subject, and down to Earth.

“*Music, Math, and Mortality*...I hope you appreciate the alliteration. I worked very hard on it,” she joked.

Chung’s first excerpt was a song familiar to many in the audience. The ominous opening notes of Beethoven’s Fifth symphony in C-minor engulfed the room, with Chung bringing the

vociferous first measures to a somber and soothing finish.

“The first point I want to drive home is this idea of resolution,” she stated. “When you hear the ending of Bach’s symphony, some of you may erroneously stand up and applaud. But the question is *why*? What is it about these last notes that gives it such a sense of finality?”

She then played a section of Wagner’s famed composition *Tristan und Isolde*, an opera about unresolved love. The selection was noticeably different from the previous one. Rather than ending with a sense of resolution, the Wagner excerpt seemed drawn-out, with listeners almost begging for its end despite its beauty.

Chung stated that we “hate” musical tensions that avoid resolution, and are left wanting more. Wagner’s piece, she claimed, let the music tell the story; its refusal to avoid the tonic (closure) reflected the unresolved

conflicts present within the narrative. Asking why we desire closure in our music, she then spoke about mathematics. Math, she claimed, can move



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 us because, like music, it is constantly filled with elements of tension and release; its cornucopia of unknown variables and rigid formulas all coalesce amicably upon the solving of

an equation.

Music is very mathematical, Chung claimed. Its “sophisticated compilation of harmonies, pitches, and rhythms

built upon the physical laws of sound” render emotional impact; like math, music is an equation. She then poignantly asked the audience to examine the tensions that exist within our own lives, more specifically the apprehension of life and death. As Christians, it can seem as though we all live in a constant state of tension, yet thankfully the act of “final resolution” is not our death, but rebirth.

“If you seek resolution, turn to the One who has created all things and who gives order to all things,” she stated. Though creation may groan and wait in

eager anticipation, she encouraged the audience to create art and remind people of the peace and solace found in God, as He is the One who will order the chaos of the world. | **CU**