In January 2015, Princeton University Concerts announced a new initiative, the Creative Reactions Contest—a writing contest designed to foster reflection on the impact of hearing classical music, as perceived by students on Princeton’s campus. The contest was a resounding success from its inception, and last year, we added a visual arts category.

This year’s contest was inspired by Gustavo Dudamel’s residency and his dedication to revolutionizing music as a platform for individual, societal, and world change. Students were asked to consider any of three themes that were explored during the residency: the intersection of Art and Faith, Art and Nature, and Art and Social Change. Over the course of 6 months, roughly 50 students participated, attending concerts and using music as one point of reference. The submission format was flexible, allowing for blank verse, prose, poetry, narrative, lyrics, and any form of visual art that could be documented on a page.

From a full field of entries one winner was selected—Princeton senior Crystal Liu. Her work is printed here and will be posted on our website, princetonuniversityconcerts.org.

Crystal Liu is a senior in the Department of Philosophy and a Certificate Student in the Program in Creative Writing. In addition to her philosophy thesis, she wrote a collection of poetry under the guidance of Tracy K. Smith, the current United States Poet Laureate and Director of the Creative Writing Program at Princeton University. Crystal chose to write a lyric essay for her submission on the topic of “Art & Faith” in order to incorporate personal reflections on family and music and the literary sources that informed her thinking about the subject.

Having played piano for over ten years in both classical and jazz settings, music has remained an important part of Crystal’s life—she calls it “a consistent source of comfort and joy.” She has attended Princeton University Concerts events throughout her four years as a student, finding the “Performances Up Close” series in which she sat on stage with the musicians to be especially intimate and sacred. Although she did not know of Gustavo Dudamel before his residency on campus, she attended his public conversation with Princeton University Professors Alexander Nehamas and Elaine Pagels on the intersection of art and faith and was inspired to learn more about Maestro Dudamel’s work in supporting music education.
“Our Western semantics are bound up with the fact that we’re a monotheistic civilization and we place a significance in signs. From layer to layer, our entire system of signs culminates in filling an ultimate sign—with a transcendence, a plenitude, a center, a meaning.”
—Philosopher Roland Barthes

I grew up in a house without God. My parents didn’t believe in believing in something, nor did they think it prudent to start. Moving to America had already eroded, against their will, so many of the habits they tried to preserve and plant anew in the dry soil of their first U.S. home. Colorado was windswept and airless and hot. Being stranded in a desert is the kind of situation that can compel conversion. But not for them. On the matter of religion, they were immovable.

We did not go to church on Sundays, and there was not much to do in the small university town where my mom had settled us. I was small, maybe four or five, and I don’t remember much from those years. I don’t know what I did all day. I only know I hated going to bed, but I would be allowed to stay up when we were watching American Idol, or, on rarer occasions, when my parents were singing karaoke. The music would be brought out in a flipbook of CDs. Ours had a bright blue fabric cover that zipped up and translucent plastic sleeves that got stuck together. The CDs were printed magenta and yellow and labeled with their contents: collected hits from the 80s, mostly Cantonese and Hokkien songs that were popular in my parents’ college years. We would play them from my dad’s black laptop. I would imitate the dances in the music videos as my parents followed the slowly greening lyrics at the bottom of the screen.

Later on, I would find karaoke embarrassing. It’s not exactly that I outgrew singing along to cheesy music, but rather I felt that my musical education had precluded the kind of enjoyment my parents took to. It was tasteless to like karaoke because I was taking piano lessons, because I knew music theory.

In high school, I joined the jazz band. It was the cool way to play piano at school, and although our uniforms were decidedly uncool—we wore navy, white, and silver suits that made us look like flight attendants—there was something genuinely appealing and School of Rock-cool about the way our band took classically trained music nerds and converted them. That’s how I fell seriously and deeply in love with jazz. I realized...
quickly, however, that improvisation was not for me. I prefer to contemplate, to sink in—trying to follow chord changes on the fly made me feel like the wind-tube man outside car dealerships. Although I couldn’t play to my satisfaction, I loved the complexity of jazz and the possibilities. I loved the mess, the hectic energy, the interplay. I loved seeing the sweat run down a soloist’s face.

One night over winter break I am working late in a café when I hear this song: It begins with a single guitar line, an arpeggiated chord progression. Lauryn Hill’s voice comes in holding onto a melody, repeated, six times, seven times. She tells of her search for God, about the tumble of life, the rough-hewn nature of it. Her voice is smooth and cool, rippling over the lines. She sings a counterpoint to the guitar, the tension between them sustained by her suspended melodies, climbing higher, and the continuous stream of the guitar, until it all melts, in a rush, into the chorus. It is the simplest line of the song, running up and down, playful and exuberant and lush. What is it to find God?

How spiritually daring women “tell God.” This is the premise of the title piece in Anne Carson’s *Decreation*. It is an opera in verse, told in parts, one each for Joan of Arc, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil. It is about women who are excluded from a certain picture of God and how they embrace a love that empties the self, so that God may “rush in.” Carson’s portrait leaves me tender. I, too, wish to be a spiritually daring woman.

Music allows me this luxury. If I am lucky, if I am paying attention, I can make room for it. The physical element of it seems true—the metaphor of being depleted or being full finds its place in the body, in the movement of breath through our cavities. When the circumstances are right, we can give ourselves, I want to say literally, to the resonant sounds. I know there must be something to this thought, because my parents, who do not believe in such things, are touched by it anyway. There is one song in particular that affects my dad. It’s called “Red Day,” and it’s a bumping 80s relic that gets him every time. Sometimes I’ll spring it on him while he’s working, and he’ll wander over with a grin, begin singing. I can see the song move him. I can see him start to dance.