

Beyond The
Red Door



MAKING A JOYFUL NOISE AT ST. STEPHEN'S

By E. Ray Walker

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! —Psalm 95:1

Wonhee Kang has been making a joyful noise to the Lord for most of her life.

But important things first before we get into all that: How does she prefer that we should refer to her? “Dr. Kang’ or ‘Wonhee,’ depends on the relationship with me,” Dr. Kang says. And yes, it is pronounced as it looks.

Dr. Kang, the new music director at St. Stephen’s, won an award in a piano competition when she was 11 years old and has been involved in music ever since.

“Music was my communication tool with myself and with the Lord. I was hired as the pianist/organist at my home church when I was 17 years old.”

Her background has remained primarily in church music.



She sang opera during her college years. She earned a degree in Voice at King Sejong University in Seoul. After immigrating to the United States 30-plus years ago, she earned a master's degree in organ and conducting church music at the Methodist-affiliated Shenandoah University in Winchester, Va. She earned her doctorate in ministry at the Methodist Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.. She also has a master's degree in Play and Creative Therapy from Leeds Beckett University in England.

Her academic chops are beyond question.

At Shenandoah University, she was deeply influenced by Dr. Stephen Cooksey, her organ professor and the director of church music at the Methodist school. "His guidance has shaped my approach to church music in many ways." (Cooksey, who recently passed away, was also the director of music, choirmaster and organist at St. James Episcopal Church in Leesburg, Va.)



Church music has been crucial in shaping Dr. Kang's life. Why? "Because it is the opportunity to love and worship the Lord with our whole being! As Matthew 22:37 taught us, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart (feelings), and with all your soul (our breath), and with all your mind (understanding the lyrics and proclaiming our belief), and with all your strength (our body).'"

Piano and pipe organ are central to her career, but she can also play other instruments. "I play multiple instruments on various levels other than piano and pipe organ. Please discover them on our journey together. I may add new ones as we go."

One instrument she has mastered is her voice. "I am a mezzo-soprano and used to be a soprano."

Before coming to St. Stephen's, Dr. Kang was director of music and worship arts at Culmore United Methodist Church in Falls Church.

Her Methodist connections are obvious, and St. Stephen's is the first Episcopal church she has served. Which raises the question: Does Methodist church music differ from Episcopal church music? Dr. Kang answers, "Interestingly, the Methodist church shares many similar music traditions with the Episcopal church, with about 65 percent of their musical practices overlapping."

The job of music director is far more than playing the organ on Sunday. According to Dr. Kang, the job is "to prepare and co-create a meaningful worship experience in our faith journey."

"And who decides what music to play? "Together, the rector, some worship team members, and I suggest selections with Fr. Trent having the final say. I would love to have feedback from the worshippers of SSEC as well."



She acknowledges being adventurous in using music styles outside the traditional church hymnal. Can we expect to hear gospel, country or rock?

“I come from a multicultural and multigenerational congregation. Therefore, I love to play and sing — gospel, country, rock and jazz at our services, when appropriate. I love to offer a wide range of musical genres, including international hymns and contemporary praise songs, in organic ways.”

St. Stephen’s parishioners might also hear compositions the music director wrote. “Recently, I composed a communion liturgy in a Jazz/Antiphons style. I am curious to see how the worshippers at SSEC will reflect on the piece. I enjoy improvising and arranging music when the time permits.”

As director of music, Dr. Kang will work closely with St. Stephen’s talented choir. “The frequency of (choir) gatherings, which may occur once or twice per week, depends on the needs of the church seasons, the calendar, and the availability of the worship team and me.”



Is growing the choir a priority? “Yes, and I love to grow the choir in organic ways.”

Music is in her family’s DNA. “All my family members are musicians. My husband is bass and has sung in church choirs all his life. (He was a pastor’s kid.) He conducted church choirs for several years as an associate pastor in small churches. My older daughter is a professional cellist and teacher. My younger daughter was a member of an a cappella quartet during her high school and college years and played the piano.”

What attracted you to Culpeper? Dr. Kang explains: “I moved from Fairfax to Warrenton six years ago and the (COVID) pandemic happened. Since then, I’ve been commuting a long distance to serve at my current church in Falls Church, where I’ve dedicated over 30 years. Over the years, I’ve mentored several student church musicians who are now prepared to take over many of my responsibilities. Currently, they are managing about 60 percent of the duties. Given this transition, I’m ready to make a change. I have several co-workers and a best friend living in Culpeper, which makes it an appealing option for the next chapter of my life.”

WONHEE KANG Q&A

Question: Regarding music genres, what is your guilty pleasure?

Answer: Jazz.

Q: On long road trips in the car, what do you listen to?

A: I listen to audiobooks. Music can distract me.

Q: What are some of your favorite pieces of music you like to play?

A: I love to sing Korean art songs.

Q: Any that you dislike?

A: Some very difficult organ pieces that I can’t play.

Q: When you are feeling happy, what music do you want to hear?

A: When I am content, I do not need any music or stuff.

Q: When you are sad, what music do you want to hear?

A: I may try to play and/or sing to express, explore and embrace my sadness.

Q: When you are Queen of the World, what changes will you make in St. Stephen's music?

A: This Queen may invite and embrace all music of the world to worship the Lord with the worshipers at SSEC to fulfill her heart's desire. "Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."



ABOUT THE ST. STEPHEN'S ORGAN

Q: What kind (brand) of organ do we have at St. Stephen's?

A: A baroque-style 1960s Casavant pipe organ (two manuals and 17 ranks). In 1995 five additional ranks and a new conventional piston system were added. Do you have manuals?

Q: What is its condition?

A: I am not sure yet. I love to discover the condition and play with it in the best condition possible.

Q: If our organ were an automobile, would it be a Cadillac, a Chevrolet or a VW bug?

A: Hahahaha. ... I had a black VW Buggy and loved to open the top to feel the air. However, I think SSEC's organ is a 64-year-old Cadillac — a lovely baroque classic to me. I hope we do not need to replace the engine too soon. I understand that I need to treat it gently and respectfully. I may need to dance more like a slow disco than a hard rock!