

As a cello minor, I am often asked by my professor, Dr. Sarah Kim, “Why are you taking this course? What does music truly mean to you?” During freshman year, I struggled with this answer – I could feel that music was something I needed but could never pin down how it connected with my life as a creative writer. When Dr. Kim suggested a project incorporating music and storytelling, I accepted, hoping a study would lead me to that universal answer to explain why I loved what I loved. By scrolling through the MU Libraries site, I found a link to a publication analyzing Toshiro Mayuzumi’s composition *Bunraku* for cello, based on traditional Japanese bunraku plays. The performance immediately entranced me, and I submitted my proposal for Undergraduate Summer Scholars a few months later. I believed studying *Bunraku* could reveal how to combine music and storytelling in a significant way. Rather, what did I learn tested my definition of success and forced me to embrace the complex possibilities of creative expression in my life.

The *Bunraku* project was a multi-layered research initiative to study the limits of artistic expression in relation to other arts. Since the 2021 USS program was online, the availability of online sources was vital to every step of my research. My study consisted of one month researching Toshiro Mayuzumi online and one month practicing *Bunraku* on the cello while composing a short story to correlate with the piece. By studying Mayuzumi’s history and the impact of his nationalist beliefs on music, I could develop a coherent idea of his intended *Bunraku* story. I would then combine my analysis of the piece with background knowledge and write a short story that acknowledged the original nuances in *Bunraku* but also incorporated my own voice. Ideally, my project would show me a new, simple way to integrate music with storytelling and help me understand similarities between music and writing.

Being a serial procrastinator, several potential challenges tempted me to delay research during the summer term. I was one of the only humanities researchers in my USS cohort, and I was certainly the only one whose work ended with a performance of their artistic skills – two performances. I racked my brain, looking for some idea to communicate the value of musical study to a room full of STEM majors. After starting two weeks late, I found that answer, unexpectedly, in the library database. I saw examples of the value of music in cultures spanning the globe, like the Wagogo people in Eastern Africa and the Métis aboriginal people in Canada. What I learned in the database not only helped me connect my research to an entire world but gave me confidence to continue onto the next stage of my initiative.

Most surprising about my experience was the information I learned by accident. Although my online research helped, the next stage of studying *Bunraku* still started behind schedule once I began in early July. At this point, I should have finished my study on Mayuzumi and exclusively focused on fashioning my short story. In reality, I was splitting my time between research, practice, and writing. The hidden gem appeared through *jo, ha, kyu*, the plot structure of a bunraku play (also the structure of Mayuzumi's composition). I searched the keywords in the library database, but the results that appeared had nothing to do with bunraku or even music. They involved meditation, literature – even martial arts. Bewildered, I searched “jo ha kyu” into Google Scholar instead; similar results turned up. *Jo ha kyu*, it turned out, was not just a plot structure in Japanese culture but also an interdisciplinary aesthetic. The structure, representing the escalation of tension ending in climax, challenged my understanding of story structures and how I had been taught to understand them in Western culture.

I completed the *Bunraku* challenge during the first week of August, shared it with my professor, then put it away. I did not present my work to peers or seek to publish. Despite what I

learned, the nuances in music and writing were very different and contributed to a process that was far more complicated than I imagined. The study failed to satisfy my search for one simple answer, and the story I wrote turned out shallow and unlike my usual writing. It embarrassed me. Yet, in the fall I visited King Library and found new perspectives I had no idea I needed. The Honors newsletter released an advertisement for the NCHC Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity, and I, eager to be rid of my work, contacted ORU Coordinator Martha Weber and Coordinator of Scholarly Communications Carla Myers for copyright and formatting advice. If I submitted the project, I could tell Dr. Kim I had tried and finally put it away for good. As I explained *jo*, *ha*, *kyu* and the story behind Mayuzumi's music to the advisors, though, I realized how much I truly learned during my project – and how much I could share with my community. I then shared my presentation with my cello studio, finally appreciating how my methods translated an entire musical composition into a new art. I also reopened my writing and saw my work beginning to succeed at breaking in an entirely new genre of writing for me. That casual interaction with faculty at the library reminded me of how to love the work I did.

What I looked for when I started the *Bunraku* project was an explanation for my interests. When I struggled and failed to find that “simple answer,” it was easy to consider myself a failure. Without the impact of my academic community, I would have abandoned my studies entirely and never truly finished the project. Instead, I learned how to appreciate the complexities of the fine arts and how delicately they interact with one another. The opportunities taught me to embrace a greater appreciation for both the work about which I felt passionate and the way it influenced my identity.