

Compositional Process and Performance Practice of Ang Pitong Huling Salita ni Hesus: A Practice-Based Study in Sacred Choral Music

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the compositional process and performance practice of Ang Pitong Huling Salita ni Hesus, a contemporary sacred choral suite by Filipino liturgical composer Lester Delgado, premiered on January 25, 2025, at St. John Bosco Parish in Makati City. Situated within the tradition of musical settings of the Seven Last Words, the work reflects the intersection of personal spirituality, cultural identity, and liturgical function in Filipino sacred music. Drawing on a practice-based research approach that integrates score analysis, written interviews with the composer and two conductors of its initial performances, rehearsal observation, and a lecture-recital performance, the study examines how theological meaning is constructed through musical structure and realized in performance. Findings indicate that harmonic design, tonal planning, and character-based text setting function as theological narrative devices, while performance practice—particularly conductor-led phrasing, tempo flexibility, and ensemble coordination—acts as a mediating layer in shaping musical expression. Interpretive decisions, including the reassignment of vocal roles and the application of selected Laban Movement Analysis efforts, contributed to enhanced narrative clarity and ensemble responsiveness. These approaches were implemented in a lecture-recital conducted by the researcher, representing the third documented performance of the work. The study demonstrates that musical meaning is not fixed in the score but emerges through the interaction of composition, performance, and embodied pedagogy. It contributes to ongoing discussions in ethnomusicology and performance studies by highlighting sacred composition as both a devotional act and a dynamic site of musical and cultural expression.

Keywords: Sacred Choral Music; Performance Practice; Ethnomusicology; Choral Conducting; Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

Sacred choral music has long served as a vital medium through which theology, cultural identity, and artistic expression intersect. Within Christian liturgical traditions, music functions not only as an enhancement of worship but also as a means of theological reflection, allowing

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scriptural narratives to be experienced through sound, structure, and communal participation. Among these traditions, musical settings of the Seven Last Words of Christ occupy a particularly significant place, offering a structured meditation on Christ's final utterances that has inspired composers across different historical periods and cultural contexts. From canonical Western settings such as those of Haydn to contemporary reinterpretations, these works demonstrate how sacred music continually evolves while retaining its devotional core (Lozinskaya 2018).

In the Philippine context, sacred choral music reflects a complex synthesis of Western liturgical influence and indigenous cultural expression. Rooted in centuries of Catholic practice introduced during Spanish colonization, Filipino sacred music has developed into a distinct tradition characterized by the use of vernacular language, accessible melodic writing, and strong communal participation (Chua 2008; Walker 2022). These characteristics have enabled sacred choral works to function not only within formal liturgical settings but also as expressions of cultural identity and shared spirituality. Contemporary Filipino composers continue to build on this tradition by creating new works that engage both theological depth and musical accessibility, reflecting the evolving needs of liturgical communities and performing ensembles.

Ang Pitong Huling Salita ni Hesus by Lester Delgado represents one such contemporary contribution to Filipino sacred choral repertoire. Premiered on January 25, 2025, at St. John Bosco Parish in Makati City, the work was first performed under the direction of Mr. Nick Berondo, followed by a Good Friday presentation conducted by Prof. Angelito Ayran, Jr. at the Santuario de San Antonio Parish. These early performances established the work within a living performance tradition, where interpretive decisions continue to shape its musical and theological realization. As a newly composed suite, the work offers a valuable opportunity to examine how compositional intent, performance practice, and pedagogical interpretation interact in real time within a contemporary sacred music context.

From a theoretical perspective, ethnomusicological and performance-based scholarship has increasingly emphasized that musical meaning is not fixed within the written score but emerges through performance. Cook (2013) argues that music exists fundamentally as performance, while Small (1998) introduces the concept of "musicking," which frames musical activity as a relational process involving performers, listeners, and the social context of performance. These perspectives shift attention from the composition as an autonomous object to the dynamic processes through which meaning is created and negotiated.

This understanding is further supported by scholarship on music and identity (Stokes 1994; Turino 2008), which highlights how musical practices construct and express cultural meaning, as well as by research on embodied cognition (Leman 2007; Cox 2016), which emphasizes the role of physical movement and sensory engagement in musical understanding. Within choral settings, these frameworks underscore the importance of conductors and singers as active agents who shape musical outcomes through rehearsal strategies, interpretive decisions, and embodied communication.

Despite these developments, limited research has examined how compositional design, performance practice, and embodied pedagogy interact within a single contemporary sacred choral work, particularly in Southeast Asia. While studies on Filipino sacred music have addressed historical development and cultural context, fewer have explored how musical meaning is constructed through the interplay of analysis, rehearsal, and performance within a specific composition.

This study addresses this gap by examining *Ang Pitong Huling Salita ni Hesus* through a practice-based research approach that integrates score analysis, interviews with the composer and conductors, rehearsal observation, and performance. It seeks to explore how theological meaning is articulated through musical structure, how conductors mediate this meaning in

rehearsal and performance, and how embodied approaches—particularly through gesture—shape musical interpretation. By doing so, the study argues that musical meaning is not inherent in the composition alone but emerges through the dynamic interaction of compositional intent, interpretive mediation, and embodied performance.

METHODOLOGY

This study examines Ang Pitong Huling Salita ni Hesus through a qualitative, practice-based research approach that integrates score analysis, written interviews, rehearsal observation, and performance. Practice-based research positions artistic practice as both a method and a site of inquiry, allowing musical meaning to be explored through embodied and interpretive processes (Barrett and Bolt 2010). Within this framework, performance is not treated merely as an outcome but as a central component of knowledge production.

Data were drawn from four primary sources. The first consisted of written responses from the composer, Lester Delgado, which provided insight into the theological, musical, and personal considerations that shaped the composition. The second source comprised written responses from two conductors who had previously performed the work: Mr. Nick Berondo, who conducted the premiere performance at St. John Bosco Parish, and Prof. Angelito Ayran, Jr., who led its subsequent Good Friday presentation at the Santuario de San Antonio Parish. Their perspectives offered valuable reflections on interpretive decisions, rehearsal processes, and performance challenges encountered in earlier renditions of the work. The third source involved detailed analysis of the musical score, with particular attention given to harmonic structure, tonal planning, text setting, and formal design. Specific passages were examined in relation to their theological and expressive implications, especially where musical elements such as modulation, harmonic tension, and melodic contour corresponded closely to the meaning of the text. The fourth source consisted of rehearsal observations and the researcher's own lecture-recital performance, which represented the third documented performance of the work. Rehearsals were documented through reflective notes, focusing on ensemble coordination, vocal production, interpretive adjustments, and the effectiveness of specific rehearsal strategies.

The lecture-recital performance functioned as a practical component of the study, providing an opportunity to implement and evaluate interpretive decisions in a live setting. Conducted by the researcher and performed by the Vocalismo Choral Group, with the Philippine Events Orchestra and tenor soloist Mr. Renz Jerson Cuevas, the performance served as a site of validation for the analytical and interpretive findings. It also allowed for the observation of how performers responded to gestural cues and interpretive modifications in real time.

Data analysis followed an inductive process in which recurring patterns were identified across the different sources and organized into thematic categories, including theological intent, narrative clarity, interpretive strategy, and embodied expression. These themes were examined in relation to one another to identify connections between compositional design and performance practice. Triangulation across score analysis, interviews, and rehearsal observation was employed to ensure consistency between the composer's intentions, the conductors' interpretations, and the observed performance outcomes.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The researcher's dual role as both conductor and analyst was addressed through reflexive documentation, acknowledging the influence of personal interpretation while maintaining transparency in the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that musical meaning in *Ang Pitong Huling Salita ni Hesus* is not fixed within the written score but is actively constructed through the interaction of compositional design, performance practice, and embodied interpretation. Rather than functioning as a static musical object, the work operates as a dynamic expressive system in which meaning emerges through the collaborative engagement of composer, conductor, and performers.

Compositional design as theological narrative

At the level of compositional design, the work presents a carefully structured theological narrative in which harmonic language, tonal planning, and text setting correspond closely to scriptural meaning. The composer's approach is grounded in a character-based interpretation of the Seven Last Words, in which each utterance is treated not only as text but as an expressive event shaped by emotional and theological context. As the composer explained, the musical material was intended to "reflect the reaction of each character," allowing melodic contour and harmonic progression to emerge from the internal emotional state of each speaker. This approach results in a compositional framework in which theological meaning is embedded in musical structure while remaining open to interpretive realization.

This relationship between harmonic structure and expressive meaning is particularly evident in Movement 3 (*Ina, Narito ang Iyong Anak*), where a tonal shift from G minor to G major occurs at bar 15. This modulation suggests a transformation in affect, moving from a state of anguish toward a more reflective or reconciliatory expression. In performance, this shift requires a corresponding adjustment in vocal production. The tenor soloist must adopt a brighter and more resonant timbre, achieved through subtle changes in vowel formation and resonance, in order to align with the harmonic and textual context. The effectiveness of this passage depends not only on accurate pitch and rhythm but also on the singer's ability to embody the expressive implications of the tonal change.

This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Tonal modulation from G minor to G major at bar 15 of Movement 3 (*Ina, Narito ang Iyong Anak*) and its realization through vocal timbre adjustment in performance practice.

Performance practice as interpretive mediation

While compositional design establishes the framework for meaning, performance practice functions as a mediating layer through which this meaning is realized. Rehearsal observations revealed that interpretive decisions related to tempo, phrasing, and ensemble coordination significantly influence the clarity and coherence of musical communication. For instance, tempo flexibility at cadential points allowed phrases to unfold more naturally, enabling the text to be articulated with greater sensitivity. Similarly, coordinated breathing and unified vowel production contributed to improved ensemble blend and tonal alignment.

The role of the conductor is central in this process. Conductors shape musical outcomes through decisions related to pacing, dynamics, articulation, and balance, effectively translating

compositional intent into performative action (Durrant 2003; Garnett 2013). These decisions are not merely technical adjustments but interpretive acts that influence how the narrative is perceived and understood. One conductor noted that allowing the ensemble “to breathe with the text” was essential in achieving expressive clarity, highlighting the importance of aligning musical phrasing with textual meaning.

Interpretive decisions and narrative clarity

Interpretive interventions further enhance narrative clarity, particularly in passages involving dialogue between characters. In Movement 2, the reassignment of vocal roles between Dismas and Jesus proved to be a significant interpretive decision. Initially, the musical setting did not clearly distinguish between the voices of the two characters, resulting in ambiguity in the delivery of the text. By assigning the passage at Rehearsal A to Dismas and Rehearsal B to Jesus, the performance achieved greater clarity in the dialogic structure, allowing the narrative to unfold more coherently. This modification also improved ensemble responsiveness, as singers were better able to internalize their roles within the dramatic context.

This modification is shown in Figure 2.

The figure displays a musical score excerpt with three systems of staves. The first system, starting at measure 8, is marked with a blue 'A' and a piano (*p*) dynamic. It features a vocal line for 'DISMAS (the repentant thief) (another male soloist)' with the lyrics 'He - sus na - ri - to ang'. The second system, starting at measure 9, is marked with a blue '9' and a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. It features a vocal line with the lyrics 'Yong m-ga-ma-hal nag-du-ru-sa't nag-hi-hi-rap sa ka-sa-la-nang na-ga-wa ka-mi na-wa'y I-'. The third system, starting at measure 13, is marked with a blue '13' and a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. It features a vocal line with the lyrics 'yong pa-king-gan u-ma-a-sa sa a-ming ka-lig-ta-san'. The fourth system, starting at measure 17, is marked with a blue 'B' and a piano (*p*) dynamic. It features a vocal line for 'JESUS: H'wag kang ma-ngam-ba a-king ma-hal sa hi-rap at pa-sa-kit na i-yong'. The fifth system, starting at measure 21, is marked with a blue '21' and a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. It features a vocal line with the lyrics 'na-da-ra-ma mag-ti-wa-la ka-sa-a-king-m-ga sa-li-ta sa Pa-ra-i-so ay ka-sa-ma na ki-'. The sixth system, starting at measure 25, is marked with a blue '25' and a forte (*f*) dynamic. It features a vocal line with the lyrics 'ta.'.

Figure 2. Annotated score excerpt from Movement 2 (Sa Paraiso Ay Kasama Na Kita) illustrating vocal role reassignment between Dismas and Jesus to enhance narrative clarity and dialogic structure.

Embodied pedagogy and Laban Movement Analysis

Beyond interpretive decisions related to text and structure, the study highlights the importance of embodied pedagogy in shaping musical performance. The application of Laban Movement Analysis provides a framework through which conducting gestures can be understood as physical manifestations of musical intention. Laban Movement Analysis conceptualizes expressive movement through combinations of effort qualities—such as space,

weight, time, and flow—which can be translated into musical gesture to influence articulation, phrasing, and ensemble coordination.

In this study, specific Laban efforts were applied to enhance expressive communication within the ensemble. The **PRESS** effort, characterized by sustained, strong, and direct movement, was used to emphasize moments of harmonic tension, particularly in passages involving secondary dominant chords. This gesture translated into a more focused and deliberate articulation, enabling singers to physically engage with the sense of tension and resolution inherent in the harmonic progression. As one conductor observed, such gestures allowed performers to “feel the weight of the harmony,” reinforcing the connection between movement and musical expression.

In contrast, the **GLIDE** effort, characterized by sustained, light, and direct movement, was applied in passages requiring smooth phrasing and coordinated ensemble transitions. This was particularly effective in sections involving gradual tempo changes or delicate melodic lines, where a sense of continuity and flow was essential. The use of **GLIDE** helped unify the ensemble’s approach to phrasing, ensuring that musical lines were shaped with consistency and clarity.

These applications are illustrated in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3 is a musical score excerpt for Movement 4, titled "Diyos Ko, Bakit Mo Ako Pinabayaan?". It shows the application of the Laban **PRESS** effort. The score is for a full orchestra and a choir. The instruments listed are Flute (Fl.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vc.), Double Bass (D.B.), Tenor (T.), Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), and Bass (B.). The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers bars 17 and 18. In bar 17, the word "ba" is under the Tenor part, and "at sa o - ras na i - to a - ko'y nag - i - i - sa ti - na - ta - wag nga - lan ng a - king A -" is under the Soprano part. In bar 18, the word "Dooh" is under the Tenor part, and "Dooh" is under the Soprano part. The **PRESS** effort is indicated by a red oval around the notes in the Tenor and Soprano parts in bar 17, and another red oval around the notes in the Tenor and Soprano parts in bar 18.

Figure 3. Annotated score excerpt from Movement 4 (Diyos Ko, Bakit Mo Ako Pinabayaan?) showing the application of Laban **PRESS** effort to highlight the secondary dominant’s tension resolving to B minor at bars 17–18.

Figure 4 is a musical score excerpt for Movement 4, titled "Diyos Ko, Bakit Mo Ako Pinabayaan?". It shows the application of the Laban **GLIDE** effort. The score is for a full orchestra and a choir. The instruments listed are Flute (Fl.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vc.), Double Bass (D.B.), Tenor (T.), Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), and Bass (B.). The key signature is one flat (Bb). The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers bars 53 and 54. In bar 53, the word "rit." is written above the Flute part, and "rit." is written above the Violin I part. In bar 54, the word "rit." is written above the Flute part, and "rit." is written above the Violin I part. The **GLIDE** effort is indicated by a blue box around the notes in the Flute and Violin I parts in bar 53, and another blue box around the notes in the Flute and Violin I parts in bar 54.

Figure 4. Annotated score excerpt illustrating the application of Laban GLIDE effort at bar 54 of Movement 4 to support ensemble coordination and highlight the flute's quaver passages during the *ritardando*.

The contrast between PRESS and GLIDE demonstrates how embodied gestures can articulate different expressive qualities within the music, providing a practical means of translating abstract musical concepts into physical action. This supports broader research on embodied musical interaction, which emphasizes the role of movement in shaping perception and performance (Godøy 2010; Leman 2007; Cox 2016). In this context, conducting gestures function not merely as visual cues but as integral components of musical communication.

Taken together, these findings support the view that musical meaning emerges through performance rather than being contained solely within the score. This aligns with Cook's (2013) conception of music as performance and Small's (1998) concept of "musicking," which situate musical meaning within social and participatory processes. The present study extends these perspectives by demonstrating how compositional, interpretive, and embodied processes interact within a contemporary Filipino sacred choral work.

At a broader level, the findings highlight the role of sacred choral music as a site of cultural and theological expression. Musical practice functions as a means of negotiating identity and meaning within specific cultural contexts (Stokes 1994; Turino 2008), while contemporary Filipino compositions reflect the ongoing evolution of liturgical traditions shaped by both global influences and local practices (Walker 2022). In this sense, *Ang Pitong Huling Salita ni Hesus* may be understood not only as a musical composition but as part of a living tradition in which theology, culture, and performance converge.

This study is limited by its focus on a single composition and a small number of documented performances—three in total, including the researcher's own lecture-recital—which may affect the generalizability of its findings. The reliance on written interviews may also constrain the depth of participant responses. Additionally, the researcher's dual role as both conductor and analyst introduces a degree of subjectivity, although this was addressed through triangulation and reflexive analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that musical meaning in *Ang Pitong Huling Salita ni Hesus* emerges through the dynamic interaction of compositional design, performance practice, and embodied interpretation. While the composition provides a structured theological and musical framework, its full expressive potential is realized only through performance, where conductors and singers actively shape musical outcomes through interpretive decision-making and embodied engagement.

The findings highlight the role of harmonic design, tonal planning, and character-based text setting as key components of the work's theological narrative. At the same time, they underscore the importance of performance practice as a mediating process through which these compositional elements are translated into sound. Interpretive strategies such as tempo flexibility, phrasing adjustments, and role differentiation contribute significantly to narrative clarity and expressive coherence, demonstrating that performance is not merely a reproduction of the score but an active site of meaning-making.

The study also emphasizes the significance of embodied pedagogy in choral performance. The application of Laban Movement Analysis illustrates how conducting

gestures function as physical manifestations of musical intention, shaping ensemble response and interpretive cohesion. By translating abstract musical concepts into embodied action, such approaches provide practical tools for enhancing both musical understanding and performance effectiveness.

Beyond its focus on a single composition, this study contributes to broader discussions in ethnomusicology, performance studies, and choral pedagogy. It reinforces the view that musical meaning is socially constructed and context-dependent, emerging through the interaction of composers, performers, and audiences. In the context of Filipino sacred choral music, the findings highlight the ongoing evolution of a tradition shaped by both historical influences and contemporary practices.

At a practical level, the study offers insights for conductors, educators, and church musicians seeking to engage more deeply with sacred repertoire. It suggests that effective performance requires not only technical proficiency but also an understanding of the relationship between musical structure, theological meaning, and embodied expression. By foregrounding practice-based inquiry, the study affirms the value of performance as both an artistic and analytical lens through which sacred music can be understood.

Ultimately, Ang Pitong Huling Salita ni Hesus exemplifies the convergence of theology, culture, and performance within contemporary Filipino sacred choral music. As a newly composed work situated within a living tradition, it demonstrates how musical meaning continues to be shaped through ongoing processes of interpretation, collaboration, and embodied practice.

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