

Pictured Above: A composite of all four banners created for the Lotus Project tour by Multi-Media Artist, Chee Bravo. *Photo Credit: Contributed.*

The Lotus Project: The Discovery of Music, Art, and Meaning in Path of Miracles

By: Lori Goldstein

Writer Lori Goldstein shares her insights into the journey that the choir and its artist-in-residence take to perform this contemporary masterpiece.

At the conclusion of its successful second season, the professional choir known as The Lotus Project of Trenton is set to embark on its first tour in June. Led by founder and director Alicia Brozovich, the ensemble will perform Joby Talbot's magnum opus, *Path of Miracles.* Chee Bravo, the choir's artist-in-residence, will illuminate the three performances with her captivating, larger-than-life artwork.

Path of Miracles is a 21st century composition that follows El Camino de Santiago (The Way of St. James), a 500-mile pilgrimage which people have made by foot as long ago as the 10th century. A myriad of routes beginning in France, Portugal, and Spain all share the same destination: the shrine of the apostle Saint James the Great, whose remains are believed to be buried in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, in northwestern Spain. Originating as a religious pilgrimage, today El Camino annually attracts about 200,000 travelers, many of whom are hikers eager to endure this month-long trek.

Alicia's eight-year journey to *Path of Miracles* was "slow and tangential." She first heard about El Camino de Santiago in 2015, when she was working on her master's degree at Westminster Choir College. A fellow singer told Alicia about her experience completing the pilgrimage, and she heard another colleague describe *Path of Miracles* as a "dream piece." Yet it was only a year and a half ago–when a handful of her singers said they loved the piece and asked her to consider programming it–that Alicia listened to *Path of Miracles.*

Alicia's first reaction was "this is the most orchestral choral piece I've ever heard." Indeed, the composer has called it a vocal song symphony. She contemplated the challenge of interpreting such an acknowledged contemporary masterpiece so early in The Lotus Project's two-year existence, and decided to take the ris

To prepare for this project, Alicia read several dissertations on *Path of Miracles* and many articles about composer Joby Talbot. Then she began to study the complex score and libretto. The first person Alicia spoke to

about the work was her conductor at Westminster Choir College, Joe Miller, who had performed it at the Spoleto Festival. He told Alicia, "It's difficult, but worth doing–just do it." Similar advice was given by Gabriel Crouch, Director of Choral Activities and Professor of the Practice in Music at Princeton University. As a member of Tenebrae, the London-based choir that commissioned *Path of Miracles*, Gabriel has sung the work 70 to 80 times.



Pictured Above: The Lotus Project ensemble. Photo *Credit: Contributed*

It was actually Gabriel who curated the work, envisioning a four-movement piece representing one of the most common travel routes on El Camino: Roncesvalles, the starting point in northern Spain, on to Burgos, then León, and finally to Santiago de Compostela. Gabriel interviewed multiple composers with the original plan of four different composers, each working on one of the movements—until he met Joby Talbot, whose preference was to compose the whole piece himself. Joby was sponsored by Tenebrae to journey along El Camino–visiting the abbey at Roncesvalles as well as the cathedrals of Burgos, Leon, and Santiago–before he completed *Path of Miracles* in 2005,"so the sites are very specific to his experiences along the way," explains Alicia.



Pictured Above: The Lotus Project ensemble in rehearsals preparing for the organization's upcoming tour. Photo *Credit: Contributed*

The challenges of performing this piece are numerous: it's written for 17 different a capella voices, as opposed to the standard four (soprano, alto, tenor, bass). Written by Robert Dickinson, the libretto is in six different and not readily familiar languages, including Latin, Greek, and Basque. Thankfully a colleague of Alicia's wrote a dissertation with a list of resources, including the international phonetic alphabet transliteration of all the text. She also welcomes the input of several of her singers who have performed it previously with other ensembles.

The work employs many polyrhythms (different rhythmic patterns occurring simultaneously), layering, and moving parts, so the conductor needs to "figure out how to navigate what you hear in your mind but then also what the singers need to see to keep the music together," says Alicia. "And there's the next level, which is really making the music. There are a lot of different colors to make the painting."

Path of Miracles has personal appeal to Alicia, as well as to some of the singers who are also Catholic and interested in the spiritual aspect of the work. She is reminded of "The Last Battle" chapter of C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, "when the Narnians experience the riches of the new heavens and the new earth as they are repeatedly encouraged to travel 'further up and further in.'" Thus, she was amazed to find out that "E ultreya es useya," heard in the libretto, was the Latin greeting of ancient travelers on El Camino, meaning "let's go further, let's go higher." "Buen Camino" is the current greeting.

Alicia explains that the first movement, Roncesvalles, tells the story of St. James's life and martyrdom. It opens with an unusual choral technique known as *pasiputput*, sung by the Taiwanese Bunun people, to imitate sounds of nature. "You hear these voices coming from different places in different languages, it is otherworldly, I think it is reminiscent of something ancient," says Alicia. "So much of that first movement is these different languages telling the same story over and over again." Also striking to her is an "extreme chord" on which the entire choir enters, which according to one interpretation, signifies the moment of St. James's beheading by Herod.

Burgos, the second movement, has been described as "musical blisters" by Gabriel Crouch. There's a lot of dissonance, evoking the drudgery of the difficult travel by foot. Stories of innkeepers cheating pilgrims, a child who was hanged but lived for 36 days because St. James appeared to him, the gruesome tradition of the distribution of the apostle's body parts all across Europe–these are examples of the disturbing and miraculous legends related in Burgos.

The third movement, León, is "lofty, like the cathedral of Leon. It's meant to evoke the way the sun hits the stain glass there," says Alicia. "Even though there's still some text about the sun being hot and unforgiving, you have this thread of hope the entire time. You get some relief and reprieve." The pilgrimage is nearing its destination.

The fourth movement, Santiago de Compostela, "slowly builds to the excitement of [reaching] Santiago. Joby cleverly uses themes from the first movement [to achieve]...continuity," explains Alicia. He also employs dance music, since he saw people dancing in the street, rejoicing in the completion of their pilgrimage.



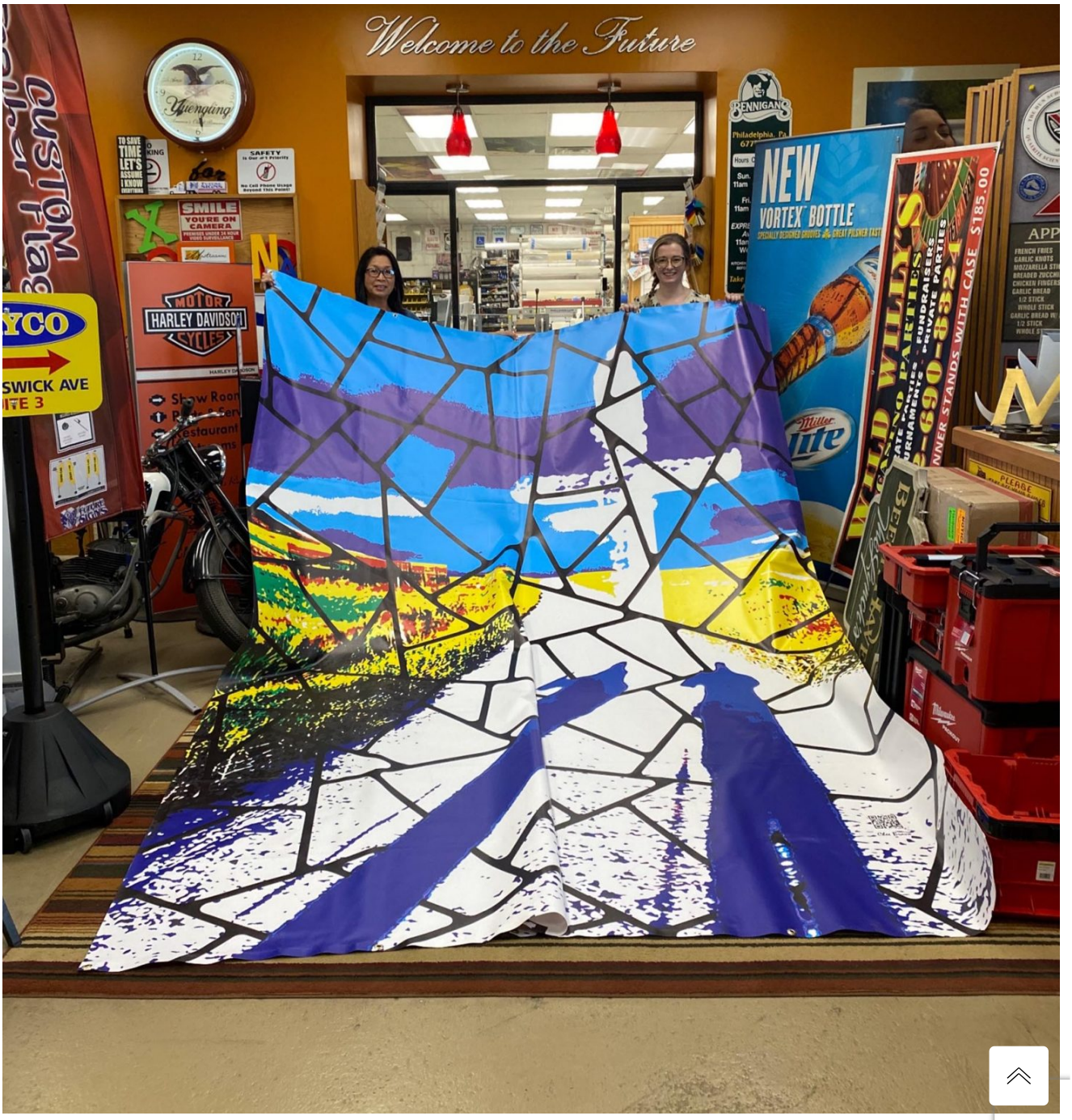
Pictured Above: Multi-Media Artist, Chee Bravo with her silkscreen *The Choir. Photo Credit: Contributed.*

Multi-media artist Chee Bravo's journey to El Camino was serendipitous. Her friend, Tamara Torres, was The Lotus Project's first artist-in-residence. Tamara invited Chee to attend the choir's *Out of Silence* concert in 2022. "This was during the ongoing pandemic, and this performance felt so hopeful that for those few precious moments I felt at peace," said Chee. Inspired by the ethereal music, she created a silkscreen titled *The Choir.* As soon as Alicia saw it, she knew who would be the artist-in-residence for their second season.

In March 2023, Chee, a recipient of the 2022 NJ Fellowship Award, had the opportunity to visit Spain and squeeze in a day trip to Burgos. "Seeing some of the landmarks in person, and meeting a couple of pilgrims were the highlights that connected me in a small way to this project." Since Chee's upbringing and schoo was Catholic, she was on familiar ground with the religiosity of *Path of Miracles.* "I felt like I was a vesse the creative ideas that came to me," recalled Chee.

After listening to *Path of Miracles*, reading interpretations of it, and viewing Youtube videos of pilgrimages, Chee created four 8′ by 12′ banners, each depicting a scene that captures the tone and meaning of its corresponding movement. She viewed the banners as four stations, akin to the twelve stations of the cross.

To make the banners, Chee produced a series of four silkscreens derived from her digital collages of images found along El Camino. She used the four-color process known as CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black) to create the silkscreens. The magnificent banners will be hung at each performance venue. (A small edition of the hand-pulled original silkscreens will be available for purchase at each concert.)



Pictured Above: Multi-media artist Chee Bravo and artistic director Alicia Brozovich holding the Burgos banner. *Photo Credit: Contributed.*

The banners are united by the geometric patterns that form stained glass in cathedrals. The first banner depicts, "Alto del Peron" (Hill of Forgiveness), an iron sculpture of pilgrims seen between Roncesvalles and Burgos, with the Pyrenees in the background. The second recalls the unforgiving, least scenic terrain of Burgos, with two long shadows and the image of a cross above. In this banner, Chee adds a fifth color, a green paint that glows in the dark to light up the path.

Notable elements in the León banner are a sunrise, signifying the hopeful feeling pilgrims have when they've reached this city, the sea shell emblem seen frequently on signs along El Camino, and the "Cruz de Ferro" (Iron Cross), the highest point (1,504 meters above sea level) along the Way. "It's a reminder of the hardships and challenges pilgrims face, and the tradition is to leave a stone at the foot of the cross, symbolizing leaving one's burden behind and seeking spiritual peace," explains Chee.

At the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, the banner's central image is the church's massive incense pendulum, called a thurible. Since it is so massive, it takes four monks to start the swinging movement of the thurible, on which Chee has also used the glow paint.



Pictured Above: Multi-Media artist, Chee Bravo working with graffiti artist Leon Rainbow on the night sky path. *Photo Credit: Contributed.*

While the journey along El Camino de Santiago is the understood programmatic element of *Path of Miracles*, Alicia thinks of choral and classical music as something abstract. Chee's vision "gives us a concrete way to experience this sonic pilgrimage with beauty. I don't think we would be able to reach the audience...without [the banners]."

To further achieve an immersive art experience, Chee asked Trenton graffiti artist Leon Rainbow to spray-paint a 36' long night sky on fabric used for murals, which she then dotted with stars. At the Trenton concert, attendees will walk beneath the undulating "Field of Lights" as they enter the performance venue.





Pictured Above: *Santiago de Compostela,* 14.75 x 10 by Multi-Media Artist, Chee Bravo. *Photo Credit: Contributed.*

At each of the three concerts, guests will be invited to place a lit candle inside a white bag, on which they may write about a miraculous moment that has occurred in their own lives. They may also place the bag beneath one of the banners. The singers will do the same at different moments during the performance to encourage audience participation.

The Lotus Project will provide extensive program notes and the libretto in English to make *Path of Miracles* more accessible to audiences. There will also be pre-concert panel talks. Before the Trenton performance, Francisco Brockway from New Hope will share his experience as a pilgrim on El Camino. Similarly, at the New York concert, Jack Schmitt will speak about his pilgrimages. In addition, Alicia will give an introduction to the music, and Chee will explain her artwork and the concept of "miracle bags."

In Trenton, the performance will have special significance since both Alicia and Chee, as well as some of the singers, are residents of the city. Artworks, the capital city's creative hub, has been an enthusiastic sponsor of Chee's artwork for this project.



Pictured Above: The 2023 Consolation of Apollo concerts held at the New Jersey State Museum's Planetarium. *Photo Credit: Contributed.*

It was commercial realtor Anne LaBate whom Alicia consulted during the search for a performance venue in Trenton. The historic Masonic Temple met the basic requirements of a certificate of occupancy and nearby parking, but most importantly, "lovely acoustics." One aspect of The Lotus Project's mission is to use non-traditional performance venues. In December 2022 and January 2023 their *Consolation of Apollo* concerts were held in the New Jersey State Museum's Planetarium. Alicia hopes that the use of industrial and other atypical spaces in Trenton will become a niche for her ensemble.

Having grown up in Atchison, Kansas, an industrial city along the Missouri River, Alicia admits to "a love for river cities." In 2016, when she sang with the Westminster College choir at Spoleto, she saw how the festival transformed Charleston, South Carolina. "After going to Charleston, I said, I want that in Trenton. You never know if you're going to get the chance to do something that feels like a calling."

In 2020 she began talking to her close friends from Westminster about creating a professional choir, and perhaps in the future, a music festival. They consulted leaders in Trenton and the arts to find out if this is something Trenton would want or need. After a year and a half of planning and fundraising, The Lotus Project's first season was launched in January 2022, with Alicia and her husband, singer Colton Martin**,** partially underwriting the first concert. It was a risk worth taking, because their performances were well-received—so much so that people asked them to do the tour. "To be in our second season and doing our first tour, it's a tall order," says Alicia. Fortunately, the James R. Halsey Foundation of the Arts has helped them as their community partner.

In her mid-thirties, Alicia believes the three performances of *Path of Miracles* won't be her last. And while it's not the right time to do the pilgrimage herself (since she has two small children), she knows she eventually will. In the meantime, she is enjoying the experience of the musical journey she has begun. "I think if I had to put it in one word: discovery—of being able to rise to a challenge, the discovery of new music, of a new way of looking at things–the discovery of it has been over-arching for everybody."

Tour Calendar:

June 24, Church of St. Dominic, 250 Old Squan Rd., Brick, NJ

June 25, The Masonic Temple, 100 Barrack St., Trenton, NJ

June 30 St. Mary Byzantine Catholic Church, 246 East 15th St., New York, NY

All concerts start at 7:00 PM, pre-concert talks are at 6:30 PM.

Tickets are free to reserve at **thelotusprojectnj.org < http://www.thelotusprojectnj.org>** , and donate-what-you-can after submitting an RSVP (suggested donation of $25). Patrons can donate to The LOTUS Project via Venmo, PayPal Giving Fund, check or cash at thelotusprojectnj.org or at the concerts themselves.