

The Earth Mass
Program Notes by Colin Roust

North Shore Choral Society
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The father of New Age music, Paul Winter has spent his career exploring the convergence of music and environmental causes. In the 1970s, he sailed with Greenpeace, to learn more about whales and their songs. He brought along his saxophone, too, so he could improvise duets with the ocean-bound singers. Throughout his career, this sense of creating and collaborating with Nature has defined much of his work. His most recent project, a CD entitled *Flyaway* recorded with the Great Rift Valley Orchestra, is inspired by and will include the sounds of the annual great bird migration from Africa to Europe and Asia, which is happening right now. But Winter's masterpiece in this ecomusicological style remains the 1980 *Earth Mass*, or *Missa Gaia*.

Commissioned by St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York City, the work was composed collaboratively by the members of the Paul Winter Consort, a group founded in the early 1960s at Northwestern University as the Paul Winter Sextet. The core members at the time of the *Earth Mass* included: Paul Winter (saxophone), Nancy Rumbel (oboe/English horn), Paul Halley (organ and piano), Eugene Friesen (cello), Jim Scott (guitar), and Ted Moore (percussion). For the *Earth Mass*, they were also joined by guitarist Oscar Castro-Neves. In the same spirit of community, the work itself is conceived in the broadest possible terms: ecumenical, global, and environmental.

The ecumenical aspects of the work were particularly important for Winter. Although the Consort served as artists-in-residence at St. John the Divine, Winter never felt particularly attached to the religious aspects of High Church services. However, James Morton, the Dean of the Cathedral responsible for commissioning the *Earth Mass*, assured him that the new Mass could celebrate the whole Earth as a sacred place and that "You could write a Mass on anything." Thus inspired, Winter began studying every musical Mass that he could track down. The end result includes traditional elements of the Mass, such as the Kyrie, Sanctus, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei. But it also has elements of both classic and contemporary Protestant hymnody, especially in the opening and closing "Canticle of Brother Sun" and Kim Oler's newly composed "Blue Green Hills of Earth," which is now hymn #163 in the Unitarian Universalist hymnal *Singing the Living Tradition*. Portions of Jim Scott's setting of "The Beatitudes" are done in a contemporary Gospel style, and the inserted piece "Sound Over All Waters" is a gospel standard associated with the great jazz and blues singer Ethel Waters. Finally, the low, slow-moving melodies heard in the tenor and bass parts of the "Kyrie" and "The Beatitudes" evoke Renaissance-era *cantus firmus* Masses.

In addition, since several of the Consort members had performed extensively in Brazil and Africa, the work incorporates both conventional Euro-American and non-European sounds. St. Francis's "Canticle of Brother Sun" text is set over driving percussion rhythms from West Africa. The main portion of "Kyrie" features the complex layered rhythms of Ewe drumming (from Ghana, Togo, and Benin). The bulk of "Sanctus and Benedictus" is

accompanied by Brazilian *baião* rhythms. Likewise, the inserted piece “Ubi Caritas” combines the familiar Gregorian chant melody with Ewe drumming inspired by Forces of Nature, an African dance company that was based out of St. John the Divine in the 1980s.

Finally, the environmental aspects of the work meant that two of the credited composers are not human. “Kyrie” begins with the recorded call of an Alaskan tundra wolf that sets the stage for an improvised trio of wolf, soprano saxophone, and Cantor (voice). The soprano section soon takes up the wolf’s motive, developing it into a cacophonous echo that returns throughout the movement (and in some other movements, tying together the work). The other credited animal composer is a humpback whale, whose recorded song provides the melody of the “Sanctus.” Throughout that movement, the choir echoes the whale, providing a dynamic interplay of human and cetacean voices. Although they don’t receive a writing credit, harp seal pups contribute much to the powerful affect of the “Agnus Dei.” Jim Scott, who co-wrote the movement with Winter, noted that their inspiration to include the seal calls came from the stories of Wilfred Grenfell, a missionary in Arctic Canada. Since the local Inuit had never seen sheep, they had no words for “Lamb of God.” The closest Grenfell could find was *kotik*, the word for a young, perfectly white, seal. The final reprise of “Canticle of Brother Sun” also features a trio of animals joining the band and choir: a loon, a wolf, and a humpback whale.

Although the work is the product of multiple composers and represents widely varying musical styles, there is also a powerful sense of unity. The work represents an almost utopian vision of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis’s Gaia principle. According to this, our entire planet is a single living system that works to maintain the optimal conditions for life. Humans are indeed the beneficiaries of our planet’s unique environment, but in this era of third-world industrialization and global warming, we also have a responsibility to treat other societies and organisms as our neighbors, as our brothers and sisters. As the Biblical text in “Canticle of Brother Sun” reminds us, “Ask of the beasts...the trees...the winds...the flowers and they shall teach you the beauty of the earth” (Job 12:7–8).

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