

This work was commissioned by the Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences, Charleston, WV through American Composers Forum as part of the Continental Harmony program. Continental Harmony links communities with composers through the creation of original musical works. The program is a partnership of American Composers Forum and the National Endowment for the Arts, with additional funds provided by the John S. & James L. Knight Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and from Marshall Field's Project Imagine with support from the Target Foundation.

Composer's Notes:

In Sideribus Domi - At Home In The Stars

by Paul Halley, September 2003

When I first visited the Clay Center last March I was very impressed with the way the arts and the sciences had been brought together under the same roof, and what a gorgeous roof it is! It reminded me of the glorious days at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, where, back in the eighties we heard James Lovelock speak about his "Gaia Hypothesis". This was essentially a scientific restatement of the ancient religious perspective on the inter-connectedness of all life, not just on planet earth but throughout the universe. Lovelock's words led to the creation of a new setting of the Mass which became known as the "Missa Gaia". Here was a marvelous, but all too rare, example of science and art coming together in recognition and celebration of an essentially religious idea.

Through the good graces of the *Continental Harmony* project I was commissioned to write a piece for the Clay Center on the themes of Creativity, Discovery and the Arts and Sciences. As an artist and an avid reader in the sciences, I was very taken with these themes, but how on earth was I going to turn them into a piece of music? For starters, what would I use for a text?

The search for the text generated the most frustrating aspects of the commission. Every serious endeavor, artistic or scientific has these moments. It took months to find suitable material and even when I settled on a handful of texts, none of them seemed to say precisely what I wanted to say. Most poets, especially the more contemporary ones, aren't great fans of science. They feel science has taken over and stolen their thunder, as if science were now intent on proving all Merlin's tricks to have been done with mirrors. All the mystery of life has been carefully analyzed, dissected and discarded. Of course nothing could be further from the truth. The universe continues to become more fascinating, beautiful, terrifying and wondrous with each new discovery. There's enough mystery here to last us at least another 15 billion years!

At this point I was visiting Susan Osborn and her husband David Densmore out on Orcas Island in the Pacific Northwest. Susan is a wonderful singer/songwriter and David is a painter, sculptor, and poet. I have been a major fan of David's poetry for a long time, so I shared with him my anxiety about ever finding the right text for this commission. The night before I left, I found, on my bedside table, the poem that became the fulcrum of this work. Entitled "Discovery", it is the center

around which the other texts orbit. The opening line of his poem seemed appropriate in more way than one: "Discovery belongs to those who are willing to be lost." The closing lines informed the quality and feel of the whole piece: "The goal of the arts and sciences? To make us better dancers." Dancers are held in the dance by attractive forces that are invisible, like gravity. The human dance is a comprehensible form of the cosmic dance. Solar systems and galaxies are very large dances. When Einstein talks about "relativity" I hear him saying everything in the universe is related. We are all "relatives" and we are all caught up in the same dance of attraction, which can be exhilarating *and* frightening, creative *and* destructive. It is a dance which calls for some kind of explanation. Who is the choreographer? I believe it is God.

For me religion, ironically, is where art and science meet. I'm talking about the profound mystery inherent in both practices. Science has been given a bad rap by us humanists – and its getting rather old – as a dry, soulless activity involving a great deal of number crunching resulting in a great deal of usually harmful technology. This can't be the case, especially now. Everywhere you look in the sciences you're contemplating the infinite – either at the sub-atomic level or the cosmic level. Scientists must be constantly having their perspective changed. They can't get too attached to any particular idea because the evidence before their eyes might not support it. In other words, they are constantly discarding prejudice. This strikes me as a very healthy approach, particularly in matters of the soul. I have learned that trying to second-guess God never works. I need always to assume I'm going to be turned around – "converted" – by God. I will always be surprised, and if, like a good scientist I'm not full of prejudice, the surprise will eventually be exciting and hopeful. Scientists must always be developing a finely tuned sense of their place in the cosmic scheme of things. This understanding can be either extremely depressing or exhilarating, depending on your perspective again. In my better moments I'm happy to be the creature and leave the creator part to God. So I find the news of my place in the universe to be very gratifying. (I'm particularly fond of my lineage with the stars.) It allows me to be more creative, not less, in the same way I imagine it allows scientists more opportunity for discovery. Religious belief, if it's worth its salt, should broaden our horizons – improve our perspective. Religion and narrow-mindedness are contradictory approaches to life.

How did I come up with the title? When I visited the Clay Center it "happened" to be the day they were trying out the new show at the planetarium. With all these ideas banging around in my head I watched the "performance" and knew the piece had to be about the stars and the people who "discover" them, who travel back in time to the point when we were all stardust. When I look at the night sky, at first I experience an overwhelming sense of awe and mystery. Sometimes I get an uncomfortable feeling of coldness and isolation. There is so much darkness and the points of light are so pale and distant. But then my eyes adjust, my night vision improves and I reach for the binoculars. Now, with a new perspective I see endless, spectacular beauty – fields of gorgeous light and energy – and I feel the attraction. I feel at home.

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