

THE MISSA GAIA/EARTH MASS

In July of this year, Sir James Lovelock, the British scientist, environmentalist and futurist, died at the age of 103. I met him in the late 70's while I was Director of Music at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. The Dean of the Cathedral, Jim Morton, who was generally ahead of his time, felt the church should be more vitally engaged in the environmental movement which was slowly graduating from "tree-huggers" to mainstream politics. Jim regularly invited eminent environmentalists and ecologists to conduct workshops and seminars at the Cathedral. Many of them preached at the main Sunday service. James Lovelock's book "Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth" had been published by Oxford University Press in 1979. Jim and the ecologically-minded folks at the Cathedral were much taken with Lovelock's "Gaia" hypothesis, which proposed that living and non-living parts of the Earth form a complex interacting system that can be thought of as a single organism. Of course, the interconnectedness of all of God's creation was not news to religious people around the world, especially indigenous folk, and followers of St. Francis were particularly pleased that even scientists were catching on!

In 1978, Dean Morton invited the Paul Winter Consort to be artists in residence at the Cathedral. Paul Winter had moved from a successful career as a jazz sax player to focus on the music and voices of humans and non-humans around the world. He was starting work on a double album using recordings of humpback whales, orcas, dolphins and harp seals with which he and the members of the Consort would improvise and compose new pieces. I joined the Consort in 1979 and had the privilege of working on that and many other recordings. In 1981, Dean Morton commissioned the Paul Winter Consort to create a new setting of the Mass that would incorporate non-human voices within a world music context. The "Earth Mass" or "Missa Gaia" was born, and has been performed around the globe ever since.

The "Earth Mass" begins with a setting of St. Francis' "Canticle to the Sun" and incorporating the text "For the Beauty of the Earth" sung to a 12th century chant. The first part of the Mass proper, the "Kyrie" starts with the call of the tundra wolf, which forms the musical 'germ' of the entire movement. The "Sanctus" begins with a beautiful long melody composed by an anonymous humpback whale that is taken up by the choir as it evolves into a joyous Brazilian samba. Since the Inuit translation of the bible uses the phrase "Seal of God" for "Lamb of God", the "Agnus Dei" features the voices of harp seals in combination with the choirs in a setting evoking the beauty and vastness of the arctic. The other pieces in the "Earth Mass" include a gospel setting of the Beatitudes, a hymn, "The Blue Green Hills of Earth", using text inspired by Rusty Schweickart, the Apollo 9 astronaut who, seeing planet earth from outer space, likened it to a tiny ornament on which, miraculously, all life as he knew it, existed. The setting of "Ubi Caritas" (where there is love, there is God) combines traditional Gregorian chant with West African chant praising the gods of nature in the Yoruba language.

The music of the "Earth Mass" features two choirs with soloists, and an ensemble of instruments comprising soprano sax, oboe, English horn, cello, drums and world percussion, guitar, bass, piano and organ. Although it is now 41 years old, the "Earth Mass" has, if anything, gained in relevance and power to transform. The theme of this year's "Season of Creation" is "Listening to the Voice of Creation". I can't think of a more effective vehicle than the "Earth Mass" for doing just that.

Paul Halley, September 6th, 2022