

Sources: A Unitarian Universalist Cantata
Background and Performance Notes

The idea: At the 2005 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, the Commission on Appraisal presented its report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, which challenged Unitarian Universalists to grow in their understanding of our theological identity as a religious movement. As part of my own process of growth I decided to explore writing a major work using the six “sources of our living tradition” as inspiration. Could these diverse theological statements be articulated poetically? Could these poetic interpretations be expressed in equally diverse musical forms? And if the answer to these questions is yes, is there an artistic statement to be made about how the six statements relate to one another – that is, in the midst of all of this diversity, what holds us together?

First Movement: *In the Beginning*

Imagining a way to represent “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder” immediately took us to a conversation about what it might have been like to be present at the birth of our universe, the moment of creation, the “big bang.” I like to think of it as music for hurtling through space. Musical influences for this movement include Unitarian Universalist composer Elizabeth Alexander, whose wonderfully rhythmic and harmonically challenging piano writing has been a joy to both study and perform, and my many years as a brass player and drum corps junkie, which has provided me with a love for poly-rhythmic, percussive and, well, *loud* music.

The opening motif is meant to be atmospheric in nature – suspenseful, bubbling with anticipation. The ascending scale on “death” is octatonic (alternating whole step/half step, resulting in a series of tritone relationships), which builds up to the “explosion” at letter A. Here it is essential that the piano and snare drum be completely locked in with each other, with an aggressive and insistent tone (even when the dynamics pull back a bit – keep it accented and rhythmically driving).

The chorus should be challenged to keep their triplets precise over the driving eighth notes in the piano/snare. I found that directing the piece in 2 was helpful for the instrumentalists but was very challenging for the chorus to follow. The recording of the premiere demonstrates just how tenuous things were – somehow we managed to avoid several all-but-certain trainwrecks, but were just lucky. Having the chorus settle down and not rush the triplets is vitally important (as is having a rock-solid percussion/piano duo, which was another issue on the premiere that nearly caused a complete meltdown).

Since the premiere performance in 2006 I made several changes to the articulations in the string parts in this movement. I also made significant harmonic changes to the string “punches” in the section beginning at letter F (from the original unison/octave hits to the more harmonically interesting choices now in the score).

Second Movement: *Transformation*

As the whole cantata began to take shape, I expressed a concern to Kendyl that there was something missing in terms of the musical diversity of the whole piece. I felt that what was missing was something that drew from the music of Central and South America. This led us to explore some of the themes of Liberation Theology, which has deep roots in Brazil. The musical influences I drew from include some of the pioneers of Latin Jazz such as Gilberto and Jobim, as well as more contemporary popular music from Brazil and Cuba (not to mention Western artists who have incorporated these styles so well, such as Sting and UU musician Jim Scott).

The choral sound for this movement should be like much of the vocal jazz tradition – smooth and light, with very little vibrato. This is especially true of the solo at letter D (and again at H). The syncopations should be effortless and crisp, rather than labored and slobby (a word I made up to describe what I often hear when “Western” choirs try to sing extended syncopated patterns).

This movement was recast after the premiere from the original 4/4 (with syncopated 16ths) to 2/2 (with syncopated 8ths), which should be helpful to singers less accustomed to reading jazz/pop rhythms.

The percussionists should have considerable freedom to play around inside the groove, which is really a slow *bossa* rather than a *samba*, once it is firmly established.

Third Movement: *All Lifted Hearts*

This is a meditation on the “golden rule,” a bit of wisdom that seems to have manifested itself in nearly every culture and religious tradition found on the planet. It is simple in structure – a refrain which the congregation/audience is invited to sing interspersed with a narrative of the golden rule, followed by a choral prayer for peace in many languages. The musical inspiration for this piece is hard to pin down except to say that this kind of “churchy” music has been part of my musical repertoire for a very long time. Perhaps there is a little Taizé influence, perhaps some monastic Psalm chants, and perhaps a little Pat Metheny in the final harmonic progression. Perhaps.

The soloist intones the refrain, then everyone (including the audience) should be invited to sing it back (letter B). The open sections between sung refrains are for the narrators. Ideally they would be male and female, with a calm but confident speaking tone. You’ll want to work with them to get the exact pacing nailed down, but I found as a general rule that cueing the narrators roughly four bars into each section got it pretty close.

Pay careful attention to pronunciation guide for the “peace” chant. Most of the words will probably seem familiar, but I was thrown by “Paco” (“peace” in Esperanto), which is pronounced “paht-so” and not “pah-ko” as it would be in Spanish. By chance I had a tenor in the premiere choir who spoke Esperanto and he corrected us right away. Go figure.

In the final section, which just fades away to nothingness, the chorus should be careful not to put too much stress on the “s” sound at the end of the word “peace.” Think “peas,” not “piece,” and

you'll get the idea. Otherwise you end up with a nasty little whistling sound that is anything but peaceful.

Fourth Source: *On Wings of Praise*

The text for this piece draws evenly from both Psalm and Gospel imagery. I faced a bit of a musical quandary on this one as I wanted to honor both the Jewish and Christian traditions without catering to the Christian supersessionist ideology that has been such a destructive force throughout the last 2000 years. Kendyl's text jumped off the page as an African-American Gospel-style tune, and I took some comfort in knowing how heavily that community has drawn upon the story of the liberation of the Hebrew people for their own strength and solace. But ultimately I wanted to be a little more explicit in acknowledging the music of the Jewish tradition, so I added the introductory *barucha*, or blessing, which can be sung by the unison choir or, if by chance you have someone with a cantorial background, a solo.

Translation of the Hebrew text: Blessed are You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, Source of creation and its wonders.

The key to this piece, obviously, is a knock-it-out-of-the-park gospel-style soloist. This person should be given considerable liberty to, as they say, "make it work." The choral sound should have a big, wide, gospel vibrato (especially as the end approaches), which is a very different sound from the traditional, classically-influenced vibrato. The choir should sound like they have just replaced the group that sang the 3rd movement with a completely different set of singers. And by the end, they should be letting it all hang out.

But ultimately if the right soloist is in place, this movement should basically take care of itself. A great drummer helps, too!

Fifth Movement: *No Other World*

The experience of the traditional Humanist, especially in the often mindlessly "faith-centered" culture we live in today, can be one of loneliness. The joy – and often relief – Humanists find within Unitarian Universalism has at times led to some unfortunate attitudes toward more traditional religious understandings, but it can be understood (and perhaps even forgiven) from a compassionate perspective if we can acknowledge the need for connection in community (even for the most avowed Humanist), and the lengths to which all of us will go to protect and safeguard those places in our lives that affirm our most deeply held convictions.

I was deeply moved by Kendyl's text for this movement, and I was intrigued by the fact that this would follow the bombastic celebration at the end of *Wings*. When everything around you is over the top in its certainty and triumphant hoopla, what does the voice of the doubter sound like? Thus the lengthy, plaintive solo, which eventually becomes a huge chorus of common sojourners in the quest for truth.

The general musical idea for this piece is that of a modern Broadway-esque ballad. I love Copland and Sondheim, and they both show up in the opening section. But the surprise for me

was that the melody and harmonic structure of the piece draw from one of my older compositions, a hymntune called *We Dare to Question*, which tried to express my own tenuous understanding of the Humanist world-view. It was an immature effort text-wise, and several years ago I decided to withdraw it from circulation. But it found a new home here, although it has undergone a substantial metamorphosis from a 3/4 gospel tune to the lush ballad presented here.

The piano part in the B section, beginning at letter H, references a piece by Unitarian Universalist composer and my dear friend Clif Hardin. His *Song of the Open Road* is still one of my favorite choral works in my church choir's repertoire, and it is a piece I was introduced to at my first UUMN conference in 2000.

You'll need a soprano soloist who can really carry this piece, someone with that beautifully pure and light tone currently en vogue on the Broadway stage. The choral sound should be full and rich, building in intensity as the piece progresses as an illustration of the power in each of our lone voices finding one another in community.

Sixth Movement: *The Sacred Circle*

We chose to go with a story to celebrate the earth-centered traditions. The musical motif is meditative and minimal, built around a heartbeat rhythm and simple, modal harmonic structure. It has "new age" written all over it, and I'm not ashamed of that. Some of my absolute favorite musicians (the Paul Winter Consort and the late Michael Hedges, to name a few) can be found in that section of the record store.

The key to this piece, obviously, is the storyteller. The person should be very engaging, and should be able to get the audience to participate by creating gestures to accompany the repeated words at the end of every section of the story (patience, strength, respect, etc.). The gestures can be drawn from American Sign Language, but we found it more effective to create new, more dramatic gestures of our own. A good storyteller will know what to do – give them considerable latitude in this area.

The piece begins and ends with wind effects. Percussion players should have fun with this, but you might also have the chorus get involved by having them "blow" their own imaginary wind (yes, they will laugh when you suggest this, and you probably will, too, but the effect is really quite magical if they take it seriously). The storyteller will begin after the "wind" has been firmly established, at which point the drum should be cued to enter. This is the "beginning" of the piece.

Now timing becomes an issue. The dramatic apex of the piece comes at letter F, and should arrive when the storyteller says "behold, the wonder of all creation..." It will probably take a few run-throughs to get this to gel, but I generally found that cueing the storyteller to start with "the elders..." at roughly the third measure of letter A (second time through) would get us there together.

The storyteller ends with a reprise of all of the words/gestures that have come before, with a multiple repeat of “joy.” Then the wind should return, and the piece fades into a haunting silence.

Seventh Movement: *The Promise*

So, what holds us together, and how do we illustrate it musically? Believe it or not, it was Kendyl’s suggestion to end with rap (if you ever meet Kendyl you might understand why I was shocked that she wanted to go in this direction!). To her credit, she knew that we needed to call in a third collaborator for this one, someone who could bring a certain authenticity to both the writing and performance of this style of music. When we asked around, all signs pointed to Justice Whitaker, who came in and brought the house down at the premiere.

The tune is a straight-ahead modern funk/hip-hop tune with a refrain that the congregation/audience should be encouraged to sing. The trick is to really pay attention to Justice as he does his free-form thing over the A1/A and D1/D sections (i.e. if he gets wound up you may end up repeating more than four times in these sections – as long as the instrumentalists know that watching for a cue is more important than just counting and dogmatically coming in on principle you’ll be fine).

Letter G, H and I each repeat twice, which allows for six verses of rap (corresponding with the six sources). At the premiere Justice asked that we drop all of the instruments out (with the exception of the drums, ad lib.) six bars into the second time through letter I. The remaining ten bars were a rap/drum kit duet, building up to everyone coming in at letter J. Listen to the recording and this should be pretty clear.

The strings should be careful to note that their 8th notes are swung. It’s funk, and it’s fast, so the swing feel is pretty light, but playing them straight would sound awful. Again, the recording will be helpful to get the idea.

The soloist should really be able to bring it from a pop/funk perspective. She should feel free to take considerable liberties with the melody and rhythm, especially at letters K and L. The choral sound is decidedly not traditional – big, open, leaning toward the gospel style from mvmt 4, but with a little more detachment and a sense of articulation that fits the style (the PRO-mise is JUSTICE, to-GETH-er we MAKE it..., etc.)

Drive it home to the end – no ritard, no diminuendo. Just a big, funky celebration that gets everyone on their feet.