

Missa Brevis, sermon presentation at Calgary February 14th, 2010:
“Valentine’s Day: The Things We Do for Love—Writing a Latin Mass for Unitarians”

With thanks to our readers: Gorham Hussey, Alan Jessop, Leslie Buckle, Marsh Haug, Bill Wuttunnee, and Pat Jessop. Thanks also to Brian Dorscht, UCC Music Director.

As the moon draws the tides, as the wind stirs the grasses, so we are drawn by love, and we become more than we might have been. What are the things you do for love?

Two years ago, Kristina Stevens, flute player, and choir enthusiast, asked me to write a Latin Mass for Unitarians. So I did.

Kristina had been driving in to church that morning, listening to the radio, and enjoying the music—a Latin Mass. She loved to sing in Latin, with its pure clear vowels. But she tired of singing words of faith that no longer worked for her. Over coffee, where so much of the work of the church is done, she lamented the lack of a Latin Mass that a Unitarian could sing with a whole heart. “Why not write your own,” I responded. “Lots of folks have Latin. Hey, I have Latin.” And I thought no more about it. Until a few days later, when I sat down to tea at Kristina’s home, firmly anchored by a venerable cat and a fine cup of tea, and Kristina asked if I could write her a Latin Mass. I said I’d go away for a week, do some research, and give it some thought. And by the end of the summer, Kristina, the cat, and I had written a Latin Mass for Unitarians—the *Missa Brevis pro Serveto*.

It is really to Kristina that the work we introduce to you today owes its existence. Kristina is a recently retired civil servant, chief assistant to the assistant chief. Kristina entered into retirement by attending a year long course on choir conducting. Kristina initiated this project. And Kristina has the power of personality that calls forth a significant effort; knowing that I was to meet Kristina on a Tuesday morning inspired me to get real busy on Monday night! Without her instigation, I would never have thought to write a Latin mass for Unitarians. Without my language skills and theological training, Kristina would have had difficulty bringing her dream to life. Kristina Stevens asked me to write her a Latin mass. So I did.

As a choir enthusiast, Kristina knew that Western music includes a wealth of lovely settings for the traditional Latin Mass. The words express deep human yearnings and provide Christian answers and reassurance, while the Latin is concise and provides pure vowels to sing.

This morning, at various points in the presentation, members of the church choir will share with you, in speech, the parts of the *Missa Brevis pro Serveto*.

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Kyrie read by Gorham Hussey:

*Kyrie eleison./Latum mare, parva navis./Kyrie eleison./Astra distant, nox frigescit.
Kyrie eleison./Vita brevis, spem avemus./Kyrie eleison.*

[Lord, have mercy. The sea is so great and my ship is so small. The stars are far away, and the night is cold. My life is short, and we hunger for hope. Lord, have mercy.]

But words and form are only the beginning; we needed music.

Over the summer Kristina discussed the process of setting a work of poetry to music with knowledgeable friends and acquaintances. Phil Hallman and Alison Nixon (Music Director at the North Shore Unitarian Church) met with Kristina and I to discuss the selection of a composer. It was Phil's idea that the work should first be performed at the CUC annual conference which will be in Victoria in May, 2010. And so it shall be. And later this summer Alison and the North Shore Choir will include the *Missa Brevis* in their repertoire when they go on tour. Alison and Kristina also hope to take it to the summer meeting of the UU Musicians Network.

By the end of August 2008 the words were close to their final form. I went to Winnipeg, and discussions continued by email and phone. Over the Christmas holidays we met with Dr. John Fitch, a Latin scholar, and made a few final changes. And Kristina and a knowledgeable team began to search for a composer to bring the words to life with music.

Gloria, read by Alan Jessop:

*Gloria./Anima sancta, quae animas mundum, quae mare navigerum, quae terras
frugiferentes concelebras, per te quoniam genus omne animantum concipitur visitque
exortum lumina solis per maria ac montis, fluviosque rapacis, frondiferasque domos
avium, camposque virentis, gratias agimus, gratias.*

[Gloria. Spirit of life, you who breathe life into the world, you who bless the sea with ships and quicken the fruitful earth, since through you all living things are conceived and, risen, gaze upon the light of day, through seas and hills, through tearing floods, through the leafy homes of birds, through lush green fields, we give thanks.]

As the search began for the right composer, I stepped back. My work was done. My part had been to juggle dictionaries for four months. I am a word person, and I love dictionaries.

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“Frondiverasque domos avium/ the leaf-bearing homes of birds”. I love that line. The Roman poet Lucretius wrote it two thousand years ago, so I reckon we’re okay on copyright and public domain. I took another line from the Roman poet Catullus, who probably took it from a Greek lyric poet. I like to think of all this borrowing as an original use of traditional materials. And I do make attribution in the notes. So my punctilious scholar’s conscience is okay with the borrowing.

But are we okay on cultural appropriation? Why Latin? Why a Mass? Can I, in good conscience, craft worship for Unitarian Universalists in a language and form used for centuries by Roman Catholics? With utmost respect and humility, I have done so, in good faith, and in respect, and, I hope, with awareness and sensitivity and understanding. I have borrowed with strong regard for the underlying purpose and context of what I am appropriating.

The mass is worship, and my purpose is worship. The mass makes room for the holy. The mass emerges from the human response to the human condition. Both Catholic and Protestant worship trace their forms back to the service of the word, from when Jewish worship was dragged into Babylonian exile, as described in the book of Isaiah. A beginning and an ending. Praise, reflection, and commission. Indeed, the word “mass” derives from the last words of the mass, “Ite, missa est”, literally, go, it is the dismissal. Go, you are sent. Completion. Commission. Purpose. Hope.

Why Latin? Because the vowels are nice to sing. But more than that. Because I love the Latin language and have studied it for many years. Because Latin is foundational to the western culture that is my inheritance. And because Latin is the language of reformation theology and scholarship. This *Missa Brevis* is named *pro Serveto* because Latin is the language in which the Spanish physician and foundational unitarian scholar, Michael Servetus, wrote his two major theological works. Servetus and his contemporaries shared their thoughts in a common language—Latin. In a world that seems increasingly fragmented, I am pleased by anything that speaks to commonality. Latin was a shared language then. And for choirs, Latin remains a shared language now, comprehensible to musicians across national boundaries.

Credo, read by Leslie Buckle:

Quid scio de mundo? Quid piscis de aqua? Quid avis de auris? Nil nisi tempestatem, nil nisi undas. Nihil ex nihilo; sum terrigena, ex aura flammaque, ex aqua et stellis. Et vitam, naturae quam debeo, mortalis telluri reddam. Credo in spiritum, super aquas spirantem. Credo in caritatem. Credo in vitam.

[What do I know of the world? What does a fish know of water? What knows a bird of the air? Nothing but weather, nothing but waves. Nothing comes from nothing; I am born

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from the earth, from air and fire, from water and stars. And my life, which I owe to nature, being mortal, I shall return to the earth. I believe in spirit, breathing upon the waters. I believe in loving-kindness. I believe in life.]

Kristina asked me to write her a Latin Mass—a foundational text on which to build a piece of commissioned music, unashamedly complex, modeled on the *Missa Brevis*, engaging both the theistic and non-theistic listener. Kristina asked me to draft, in Latin, words that Unitarian Universalist choirs could sing with a whole heart.

The Latin gave us compressed phrases and strong words—a spiritual shorthand—with clear vowels for singing. I understood enough of how the language was strung together to work with some coherence; any poetic turn I gave the work generally derived from the repetition of grammatical patterns. More complex Latin poetry was a gift of the ancient Latin poets. We tried to drive the text with strong concrete imagery: hands and feet, mountains and seas and stars at night. We tried to craft figures of speech into which each could locate their own meaning. For example, “*Credo in spiritum, super aquas spirantem*” translates as “I believe in spirit (literally, breath), breathing upon the waters”, recalling the first chapter of Genesis, verse two.

Whether we are familiar with scripture or not, I hope this image is open and accessible to a broad range of interpretation. I hope that each of us has some visual image or memory of mist upon the waters that ties us back to a sense of beauty and wonder, in the moment, an image drawn from nature.

According to the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, approximately eighty percent of UUs will locate their most meaningful spiritual experiences in nature, and another eighty percent of UUs will self-identify as humanists. And some know God, and name it so. This text is for all persons, however they choose to name the threads of life.

It soon became clear to us that the text would be about faith—where do you place your confidence, where do you find meaning, where do you place your trust? We made a conscious choice to value the humanist, atheist, agnostic posture no less than the deist, theist, mystic. It was important to us that all might find the work inviting. Using concrete imagery, and leaving room for folks to find their own way, we attempted to craft a vehicle in which all could place some trust. And I say we, not I, because this was indeed a collaboration. I sweated my way through the dictionaries and grammar books. But it was Kristina who dreamed this work, and it was in conversation with Kristina that my own ideas became clear.

And this is why, dear friends, we gather in community; for together we are surely greater than the sum of our isolated selves.

The discipline of the *missa brevis* form also contributed to the compressing of ideas to their essence. We set out to craft a work of two hundred Latin words. No more. What you hear today is version 6.1. Version 6.1 is less than half the length of earlier drafts. Great rafts of *minutae* and digression were reduced to a single lotus blossom, floating on the language and the form. It will be the music, not the words, that bring the text to fullness.

Kerygma, read by Marsha Haug:

Ex montibus, e silentio, vox auditur, quieta et parva, quae dicit per saecula, reverentia vitae, libertas, ratio, et tolerantio. Docet vox et scripsit manus ut mundus unus, unus deus, salvus omnis, omnis dignus.

[From the mountains, out of silence, a small still voice is heard that proclaims through the ages, "reverence for life, freedom, reason, and tolerance". The voice teaches and the hand has written that the world is one, and the holy is one, that all shall be saved, and all are worthy.]

Over the course of millennia, there have been many variations in the mass. Certain traditional elements may be included, fewer with a *missa brevis*—the short mass. Some elements I set aside, but most I did find meaningful. I chose seven elements in all.

First, the Kyrie, the traditional beginning. The words are Kyrie eleison, Greek for Lord have mercy. Traditionally, the next line would be Christ have mercy. As a Unitarian, I am more comfortable working with Jesus the man than Christ the God.

Instead of the alternation of Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, I chose an alternation of two voices, one that calls outwards, Lord have mercy, and then a voice that speaks to the interior landscape, acknowledging fear, loneliness, and the hunger for hope.

Next, the Gloria: praise. As one raised in a posture of wonder and awe before the universe, I embraced the Gloria to express an affirmation of life and thanks “for the beauty of the earth and the splendour of the skies, for the love which from our birth, over and around us lies”.

[cf # 21 in the hymnal *Singing the Living Tradition*]

The Credo is my credo, distilled from the nebulous wonder with which I engage the world. Unitarianism has no creed, but each of us has some belief, voiced or unvoiced, recognized or unknown, that gets us through the night.

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I listened to the thundering confidence of Mozart's Nicaean Credo in his Coronation Mass. I could not begin to write words of such triumphalism and finality.

I wrote : *credo in spiritum, super aquas spirantem; credo in caritatem; credo in vitam.* Life, kindness, and the breathe upon the waters. That I can write with my whole heart.

Next, I felt a need to include *kerygma* and *sermo*—sermon and proclamation; for the most part, a *missa brevis* does not. Unitarians work with service of the word, many words.

Moving from a credo or personal belief, I then generated a *kerygma*: what is your message? What is your good news? One might call it an elevator speech: *ut mundus unus, unus deus, salvus omnis, omnis dignus*— that I perceive a great wholeness in the world, encompassing all persons in worth and dignity.

And from proclamation to sermon: given that belief, that good news, how shall I live this day, what choices shall I make?

And then, returning to the whole, to the great beauty in which we participate—*sanctus*, and from there an end to echo the beginning, and with it blessing and commission: walk in beauty, walk in love, walk into the world and live your truth with hope and courage—*Ite, missa est.*

Kyrie, gloria, credo, kerygma, sermo, sanctus, and benediction.

I offered the title, “Missa Brevis pro Serveto” because Michael Servetus, sixteenth-century physician and theologian, stands at the crossroads of the reformation, and his publications on theology were written in Latin. Latin made them international, and carried the arguments for a unitarian theology through many lands

May this work, in all humility, carry that journey one small step further.

Sermo, read by Bill Wuttunnee:

Quomodo vivamus? Odi et amo. Atque olim amissas flemus amicitias. Quod feci cum minibus in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua. Namque innocentes poenas habere video. Et noctis ad oras tremesco. Non habet manus deus nisi nostras. Non incedit pax pedibus nisi nostris. Sim ego spes, Sim ego lumen ex colle. Ut sit lux nostra ubique meanti similis soli, ut sacellum cor bonum sit.

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[How shall we live? I hate and I love. And we weep for friends of long ago, now lost. The work of my hands might well be writ in wind and running water. For I see the innocent suffer. And I tremble on the shores of night. God has no hands but ours. Peace walks on no feet but our own. May I be hope, may I be light from a hill. May our light go everywhere, like the sun. May our shrine be the good heart.]

A piece of music is interpreted in part through the emotion with which it resonates. Kristina described, as follows, how she, as a choir leader, would emotionally engage the Missa Brevis: “Yearning to live in harmony with the universe, how can we approach everyday life? My reactions to life draw me into strife, and I feel sadness and anger at the losses and injustices I see. But the holy has only each of our hands with which to act. Peace will only approach on our own feet. It is up to each of us to make the world a better place. In this work, I join with others who are doing their best to serve the goodness in life. Our Unitarian Universalist beliefs provide the hope and the motivation to keep going, to keep striving for peace and justice.”

Sanctus, Benedictus, read by Pat Jessop:

Sancta terra et pax beata.

Benedicite. Benedicta quae manibus adhibet misericordiam.

Benedictus qui venit in pace. Benedicti sitis. Ite, missa est.

[Holy the earth and blessed is our peace.

Speak blessing. Blessed is she whose hands bear lovingkindness.

Blessed is he who walks in peace. Blessed be. Go your ways.]

[Fran speaks:] *Ite, missa est.* Go, you are sent out into the world, strengthened to serve. And may we all find words for our music, and music for our words.

Note: Tobin Stokes, who was chosen to set the Missa Brevis to music by the project committee, consisting of Victoria Music Director, Phil Hallman, the North Shore Unitarian Church Music Director, Alison Nixon, and project leader Kristina Stevens. Tobin has extensive experience as a choral composer, and has recently been the composer in residence for the Victoria Symphony, who recently premiered one of his works.

The Victoria Church is raising the funds to commission composer Tobin Stokes to write, for the text you have heard this morning, a major work for choir and instrumental accompaniment. The plan completed work will premiere at the annual meeting of the Canadian Unitarian Council in May of 2010 in Victoria. It will be a very exciting first for the Victoria Church!

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Bibliography

Standard reference works, including the Encyclopedia Britannica and the Wikipedia website, offer background information on the missa brevis form and the life and work of Michael Servetus.

The Report of the Commission on Appraisal is available through the UUA bookstore and website, online.