

EMERGENT UNIVERSE ORATORIO: A COSMIC CREATION STORY
Celebrating a year of growth and transformation—Sept. 15, 2013-Sept. 15, 2014)

Just about one year ago preparations for the performance of the *Emergent Universe Oratorio* by Sam Guarnaccia were in full swing. Art works by Cami Davis were being hung in the breeding barn at Shelburne Farms, Vermont; final instrumental parts were being polished; choristers and soloists were practicing their parts; visitors were arriving from afar, and the entire community was abuzz with anticipation. The goal was to help create a cosmic shift in consciousness via the combination of beautiful music, inspiring artwork and earth-shaking words—both poetry and prose. (Indeed, the earth did shake, or wobble, a little more on the 15th, according to one astronomical source!) The whole (of the EUO event) was truly larger than the sum of its parts! Eight hundred chairs were set up in the breeding barn, but more were added when over twelve hundred people actually attended! <http://www.shelburnefarms.org/about/our-campus/the-breeding-barn>

Since the time of Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), the oratorio has been one of the chosen forms for presenting musical stories of creation. Recitatives tell the story, arias (usually sung by one person) share emotional content while allowing the soloist to soar vocally, and choruses add a powerful exclamation point. Originally the oratorio was a medium for telling religious stories in a church setting. The word “oratorio” comes from the Oratory of St. Philip Neri in Rome, where mystery plays had been performed in medieval times.¹ Haydn’s “Creation” oratorio was first performed in 1798, to great acclaim. In current times, composers are finding the oratorio to be the perfect vehicle to present music inspired by creation stories and/or environmental issues. In a quick, non-exhaustive survey I found at least ten such oratorios written since the beginning of the 21st century.

The EUO (as I will refer to Emergent Universe Oratorio from now on) is composed of spoken recitatives with orchestral support, choral pieces, and solo-choral combinations. There is one quartet, called an Aria for SATB, and a short solo viola interlude. The lyrical libretto was inspired by Bill McKibben’s Eaarth: Life on a Tough New Planet, the writings of Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry, <http://www.thomasberry.org/> and the award-winning film Journey of the Universe by Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Swimme.

<http://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org/>
<http://www.emergingearthcommunity.org/>

The Premiere librettists were Rebecca Kneale Gould, John Elder, Caitlin Adair, Peter Adair, Cameron Davis, Paula Guarnaccia and Sam Guarnaccia. The choral pieces are, with one exception, poems by Thomas Berry, Rainer Maria Rilke, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wendell Berry, and William Blake.

The purpose of the EUO is to implant a new creation story in human consciousness. Insidiously, although most people have evolved in their understanding of the cosmos, the concept of “dominion” has continued to be part of the paradigm! Guarnaccia, with his affinity for ecstatic environmentalism, says he hopes to bring “...a

perspective that enlists the heart as it relates to eco-existence: one fully cognizant of human(ity)'s embeddedness within the biosphere and the journey of the universe.”

Donella Meadows has written about leverage points for transformative action in a paper delivered in Asheville, North Carolina in 1999. She lists twelve leverage points in gradation from the simplest to the most complex—the first being a parameter change, such as a tax on carbon. At the upper end of her system she lists paradigm changes (in individuals, much like a “conversion” experience), where one suddenly sees with new eyes.²

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_leverage_points

This is the transformation Guarnaccia is aiming for—one that transcends the paradigms!

The lyrical recitatives (which are spoken, but supported with evocative instrumental music) and the choral movements take the audience and participants through several stages: *wonder and awe*—the scientific evolution of the universe, *the unflinching gaze*—the current state of the social and environmental world, *grief*—the recognition of what we have lost, and *celebration*—the emergent possibilities as humanity reinvents itself from “homo-centric to eco-centric eco-sapiens.”³ Guarnaccia’s music attempts this process by means of shifting tonalities and descriptive melodies. His soaring music embraces the lyrical libretto much like an ever-expanding universe, helping us to understand cosmological inflation at a cellular level.

First, let us examine a few descriptive passages. In “Morningside Cathedral” (poem by Thomas Berry) the “Whale song from the deep of the sea” drops down an octave, taking the listener on a deep dive into the ocean of the unconscious mind. <https://www.youtube.com/user/SamuelGuarnaccia>

Interestingly enough, Haydn does a similar thing with his “leviathan” in “The Creation:” “Upheaved from the deep, the immense Leviathan sports on the foaming wave.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2RWbEq07k>

As an aside, Guarnaccia says he did not listen to Haydn’s Creation in the process of writing the EUO! For Guarnaccia, water is melismatic, and the listener can see streams and rivers cascading as the vocal line weaves its way through the shifting tonalities. Haydn’s rivers also tumble and splash through the tonalities of the Classical period!

“Gravity’s Law” (poem by Rilke) gives us good examples of Guarnaccia’s descriptive style. The original motive, a falling line—G-F#-Eb-D-Bb—occurs again, after humans, having become entangled “...in knots of our own making” begin again like children. Later, after more struggles with gravity, when we finally learn to “trust our own heaviness” as we fall, the descending musical line is more diatonic. <http://samguarnaccia.com/gallery/>

In the choral section, “Awakening” (poem by Mary Evelyn Tucker), the word *shivers* is onomatopoeic (“We are beings in whom the universe *shivers* . . .”), and we suddenly feel the goosebumps on our arms and in our whole being! Here we become the universe!

Of the EUO’s shifting tonalities Guarnaccia says, “I found myself steering away (instinctively, intuitively) from diatonic scales, especially major ‘keys.’”⁴ However, his instinctive use of the Phrygian mode is especially interesting, since he is a classical

guitarist with a love of flamenco music! As Guarnaccia says, in “Gravity’s Law” (the second choral movement) he used the Phrygian mode for an “exploration of ‘entanglement’ . . . that Flamenco sound, the gypsy ‘duende,’ the passion of just being right or wrong. . . .high energy without certainty, conviction without assumptions.”^{5]} Also, I find his use of open chords (without a third) to be similar to the “power chords” of rock guitarists! This is where the similarity ends, however, since his resolutions are often quite surprising—leading the listener to a new place (and by the end of the oratorio, hopefully, to a new paradigm)! Can this actually happen? *Did* this actually happen? Yes, indeed! Combining inspiring content and emotional experience leaves one defenseless and allows transformation to occur. Let me share a few of the comments I received from participants and audience members: Barbara McKay wrote, “The experience of having the originally impenetrable music gradually unfold itself to me was so exciting and satisfying. . . .The audience was huge for this area – about 1200 people – and it was amazing to feel that people were transformed there, from ‘consumers’ of art to **witnesses** of what was both a celebration of local, artistic collaboration and a public ritual of love and grief for our planet.”⁶ Mary Evelyn Tucker said (in a letter to Guarnaccia), “People were indeed transported by the event! A shift in consciousness with many ongoing reverberations. . . .”⁷ And from John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker came this official endorsement: “The *Emergent Universe Oratorio* is a transformative work of art—one of the most unique and beautiful expressions of the epic of evolution. It is an inspiration to all of us who have been trying to birth this new story. It will continue to inspire thousands of others with its soaring music and penetrating libretto”⁸

I loved it. All of us loved it. . . .your music. . . .so fresh and interesting and different. It was constantly surprising me with its fresh and invigorating sound. . . .how wonderful it was to be enlivened by your music. I felt my ears and senses and soul opened up by the sound. I so wish I could've been there in person! Hardest heartiest congratulations, Sam! It is a fabulous and deep creation. I personally could not have been more delighted. It is a beautiful piece and I hope people everywhere will be able to experience it and come alive with its power. **Brian Swimme, Evolutionary Philosopher, author, mathematical cosmologist.** www.brianswimme.org

Dear Sam,

What a thrill to receive the DVD of the Emergent Universe Oratorio in the mail! It was particularly moving to me to listen to the choir sing the words of “Gravity’s Law” to the music you composed.

And I imagine, too, how moving it was for you to bring that opus forth at every stage of the way.

Blessings on you through the coming years,

Joanna, -Joanna Macy, Systems theorist, author

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One very personal testimony came from the soprano soloist, Jane Beaumont-Snyder. She wrote first about her experience in rehearsals: “The process of practicing for

and performing in the EUO was itself a seeming microcosmic story of the universe: of how we move through raw material and then gradually shape it into an alignment with our intention, understanding, prayer . . . The journey to the performance brought me to a completely new understanding of the world and an ever-widening inclusion, a very embodied realization that even dissonance has a place in the world's story."⁹ Jane had an even more visceral experience in performing the EUO. With her permission I will tell it to you. Although her words are very moving, they are too long for this paper! She began the solo passage of "The Grandeur of God," her all-time favorite poem by Hopkins, on the wrong note! Horrified, because she loved the music and knew she was ruining the whole performance, she felt like she was in a parallel universe where time passed slowly and everything was painfully out of kilter. After what seemed like an eon (although it was really only about seven measures), she found her place again. When she finally could see things in perspective again, that perspective had changed forever! The precious gift of the EUO for Jane was that everything has a place in the universe—even the mistakes. It is the mistakes that lead to higher consciousness and new growth. "We must embrace the dissonances," she says, and she adds, "My world is so much more inclusive and expanded now, quite viscerally so."¹⁰ Indeed, she has transcended the paradigm!

In another report from a person who did not perform in the EUO, but was involved in publicity, she shares that she has "...integrated the Journey of the Universe story into (her) daily meditation practice. Breathe in (image shrinking to the smallest cell within the Universe): breathe out (image expanding to the outermost margin or creative edge of the Universe)." In her words, "Humanity and my soul rest at the center, at the perfect moment and perfect time. The EUO experience reminds me of my responsibility to take action for love of whole and the holy within the Cosmos and that is planet Earth."¹¹

The Rev. Nancy Wright wrote, "I am an environmentalist and pastor, and to sing Berry's "The Peace of Wild Things" to 1,000 people was deeply moving. My whole heart and soul were singing; many of us who have worked to care for the earth for decades have come to wrestle with despair--what can we do? Berry captures that longing for harmony and wholeness." Richard Reed, who sang in the chorus, is busy spreading the word about the EUO to his friends outside Vermont. He has long been interested in cosmology, but he says, "the way it is presented in the universe story (EUO) is one of the most powerful I have ever heard." Margaret Roddy wrote: "EUO really spoke to my existing world view but it was wonderful to have that world view set to music by as gifted a composer as Sam. I think the paintings that Cami Davis did added an additional layer to the sensory experience." She adds that she has known the universe story for a long time but hasn't always been good about letting the song be heard. "EUO freed up my voice."

Suzanne Monzel wrote: "I already believe we are all connected. Many of the opportunities afforded me here on my journey have enriched, enhanced, and solidified my belief that we are energetically connected. Being exposed to the oratorio offered me the opportunity to engage in deep, rich, heartfelt conversations with many who share

similar thinking about us all being connected. It exposed me to others with different thinking about this issue as well. Such diversity we shared. It was all beautiful for me.

“This experience opened my heart in such an expansive way (a huge bonus that wasn't anticipated!!). Many musical experiences expand my heart however I have not had an experience like this EVER before. I am so grateful for ALL of IT.”

Candis Kjelleren adds: “The words and the music are continuing to flow through us and there were a few who said, " it feels like we have fallen in love." And as Sam says, " When two people fall in love, then amazing things can happen." What happens to an audience of 1200? Or a chorus of 25 who were immersed so intensely?”

It is clear that the Emergent Universe Oratorio changed lives. Can it change the world? If we believe, like William Blake, that “...thou cans't not stir a flower, without troubling a star,” that everything is connected, we will all go out singing the final choral piece from the EUO: <http://samguarnaccia.com/gallery/>

“To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.”

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