

ecospirit

Quarterly

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INSTITUTE FOR ECOSOPHICAL STUDIES

Ecosophy is a wisdom that is danced, sung, painted and otherwise expressed and conveyed in forms and movements as diverse as the Earth itself. These media transform values, attitudes and perceptions so that one's whole being can be better attuned to the dynamics of the Earth.

This issue of Ecospirit will consider the works of two artists who have assimilated the wisdom of the Earth and conveyed this wisdom with creativity, clarity and power--Paul Winter, musician, and Ansel Adams, photographer. It was a performance of Paul Winter's Missa Gaia: Earth Mass that convinced this writer of the indispensable role the arts must play in expressing and evoking the ecosophical vision. For one brief moment, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine became a microcosm in which the myriad voices of the Earth were raised in celebration of the mystery and plenitude of existence on this planet.

Contemplation of the art of Ansel Adams can have an equally profound if more tranquil affect. This tranquillity, however, is a fire that purifies and empowers. It purifies by clearing the mind and heart of the clutter of egoism and bestowing an ecological humility. It empowers by turning pain and anger into moral commitment when confronted by the non-art of demented developers: hollowed mountains, denuded rainforests, toxified land, acidified lakes, dried wetlands and paved pastures.

As stated in our first issue, the Institute considers "that the earth has intrinsic value apart from its instrumental value for humans. Human action should be guided by a respect for and recognition of these other values. We are part of a web of interrelated and interdependent beings. Hence, we cannot realize our own identity or fulfill our own destiny, even in the realm of religion and spirituality, apart from these other beings and the whole earth. Thus, to paraphrase Whitman, all human activities, including economics, politics, (art) and religion must be judged according to how they reflect and corroborate the wisdom and dynamics of the earth." Certainly the art of Winter and Adams must be judged as superior. The same must be said of the poem by Cayle in this issue which seeks a shift in our conception of deity in the west.

Don St. John

PAUL WINTER'S MISSA GAIA: ECOSOPHICAL
MUSIC OF THE SPHERE

by Paul Larson

As individual cosmologies develop, expand, gain acceptance and generate social power, artists inevitably transform the new ideas into perceptible vital emotive forms. Every potent social movement has its song. When that song is also a masterpiece, the movement is indeed graced. If, in addition, that masterpiece transforms the past into a new present stunning enough to shape the future, the culture has received a great gift.

The ecosophical movement has its song in Paul Winter's masterpiece Missa Gaia Earth Mass, for the Missa Gaia embodies a moving and convincing vision of the grace of nature and provides an opportunity for wonder and praise in the face of an interdependent cosmos. Furthermore, the extraordinary power of the music of Missa Gaia makes it worthy of being considered a part of the long musical tradition of Mass composition. To this tradition the Missa Gaia also contributes the vital interests of members of this late twentieth century earth-community.

On May 10, 1981, Missa Gaia Earth Mass was premiered in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. The date for this premiere had been carefully chosen. May 10 was Mother's Day and the Earth Mass celebrated Mother Earth. Associations between time and performances of the Missa Gaia went even deeper. One of the recording sessions was held on October 4, 1981 to commemorate the birthday of St. Francis of Assisi. In addition, the year 1981 was the 800th anniversary of St. Francis' birth. The Mass was dedicated to St. Francis, an early ecosophist, because of the eloquence and persistence of his vision of the cosmos as an interdependent family. Therefore, sections of St. Francis' "Canticle of Brother Sun" both open and close the Missa Gaia.

Like St. Francis, Paul Winter communes with the wind, the wolf and the birds. St. Francis, however, was only able to record his communion in words. Modern sound recording and reproduction made it possible for Winter to expand St. Francis' vision by having the voice of other animals join with human voices and instruments in a cathedral, a capability available only to sculptures and painters until recently. Songs of whales, seals and a

river join with human songs in an urban cathedral--a wonder that probably would have won St. Francis' admiration. One reason this Mass is a rightful expression of our time is because of Winter's imaginative use of sound technology to enhance his and St. Francis' cosmology.

Essential as contemporary sound technology was in realizing the Missa Gaia, its use alone does not make this Mass unique. Bernstein's Mass, for example, calls for taped sound, sound amplification and electric instruments. What is unprecedented, however, is the content of the taped sound and its importance in the Earth Mass. The sounds of nature became essential components of the Mass's structure. Cries of the Alaskan wolf, the hump-backed whale, the harp seal and the loon are songs to Paul Winter. They are part of the sphere's music. As such they played a basic role in shaping the musical material of the Missa Gaia. Natural and human music were integrated so completely, that should the song of the humpbacked whale be removed from the Sanctus, the Sanctus would collapse. Collapsing the Sanctus, in turn collapses the integrity of the entire Mass. Basically, however, the Missa Gaia is so profoundly dependent upon these earth-sounds because of Winter's ecosophical vision.

The first component of this vision is the realization that we are of one household (ecos). Using modern technology and musical techniques from the past, Paul Winter "co-composed" a Mass with other animals to demonstrate the family nature of the relationship between humans and all other cosmic forms. The successful aesthetic integration of human and other songs with the traditional structure of the sung Mass makes Missa Gaia an ecosophical song.

Ecosophy refers not only to human wisdom regarding nature as a household, but to the earth's wisdom as a bio-spiritual organism. In Missa Gaia the second meaning is expressed by means of a monumental initiation journey into earth-wisdom, a journey that encompasses nearly the entire first-half of the Earth Mass.

Our musical initiation into the wisdom of the living earth begins in response to the cry of the chorus "Kyrie eleison," "Lord have mercy upon us." The response to this chorus is a solo "Beatitudes" accompanied by the chorus, the cathedral choisters (boys chorus)

and piano. The conclusion generates jubilant congregational clapping. "Beatitudes" is the answer to "Kyrie eleison," affirming the blessedness of all of the earth's inhabitants. The gift of mercy is here within the living earth. The mercy is this spiritualized biosphere. Missa Gaia introduces us into a new world-view, quite opposed to current scientific materialism or philosophical nihilism.

"Beatitudes" is followed by the communion hymn "Mystery." As the mystery of the order of the earth overtakes us, we are transported to a point in outer space. From this point, the beauty of the earth is now irrefutable. An instrumental musical journey through that beauty commences ("Return to Gaia"). Paul Winter, playing the soprano saxophone, joins Paul Halley, the organist for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Beginning on the pitch that ended "Mystery," Paul Winter spins out a thoughtful, serene melody supported and propelled by a progression of wonderful organ harmonies reminiscent of late-romantic music. As Winters' improvised solo fades, Paul Halley begins an immense improvised crescendo that ultimately utilizes the full power of the Cathedrals' colossal organ. At the climax the melody "For the Beauty of the Earth" sounds and the music begins receding. This improvisation is the most sublime music in the Mass. The representation of a return to earth from outer space is so moving in its power that it stands alongside the greatest recorded improvisations of the century.

The journey ends in the depth of the Grand Canyon. The call of a loon welcomes us back to earth and we rest gently on the canyon floor, the oldest exposed part of Mother Earth. Her heartbeat becomes audible through an American Indian drum. The sounds of the cathedral organ melt into the gentle flow of the Colorado River. Accompanied by the river, the drum, and occasional birds, Paul Winter improvises on the chant melody "Adoro te devote." A mood of profound peace blossoms.

The expansive musical structure undergoes further transformations. As the sound of the organ had become the sound of the river, the river's sounds now dissolve into those made on a tambura, a musical instrument from India. Accompanied by a tambura, the symbol of an ancient tradition of sacred music, the boys choir begins singing "Adoro te devote," symbolizing the Western sacred music tradition. The return to the foundation of

the Mass, a Gregorian chant, combined with the accompaniment of Indian music, is a moment of great beauty.

The response to this sublime journey is one of deep admiration expressed in the hymn of praise "For the beauty of the earth, sing, oh sing, today." These words of affirmation conclude the initiation as the congregation is lead in singing by Susan Osborne. Her solo "Mystery" began our initiation. Symbolically, one individual's personal vision of the interrelated sacredness of the cosmos becomes a shared communal vision. A purpose of Missa Gaia has been achieved: remembering "through music our Mother Earth, our sacred connection with the Universe" (Winter). Expressing the integration of Mother Earth, its mystery and heartbeat, makes St. Francis' "Canticle" our canticle and the full meaning of ecosophy is expressed in song.

The initiation is a vast musical design based on a single melody, technically a cantus firmus, a pre-existing melody serving as the foundation for a musical composition. While this compositional device was invented in the late middle ages, Renaissance composers, in their efforts to unify diverse movements of a Mass, frequently constructed every movement on the same melody. Such a Mass is called a cantus firmus Mass.

A Gregorian chant from the fourteenth century is the cantus firmus (fixed song) for Missa Gaia. The melody is of a Latin hymn "Adoro te devote" with text by St. Augustine. In addition to appearing as a chant, often the basis for improvisation, "Adoro te devote," appears in the Missa Gaia in its nineteenth century Anglican version, "For the Beauty of the Earth," with a text by Folliet Pierpont (1864).

When Paul Winter constructed a number of movements in Missa Gaia on a Gregorian chant, he revived a practice widely used by Renaissance composers. Before Winter, however, composers only used a cantus firmus to unify the movements of the sung Ordinary, that is, Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Benedicamus and Agnus Dei. In Missa Gaia, "Adoro te devote" is used chiefly in movements that are not part of the sung Ordinary. Such a use is definitely unconventional and probably unique. In this, as well as in ways described already, Paul Winter's Missa Gaia contributes to the long and varied tradition of Mass composition.

Missa Gaia is not only an ecosophical song, it is an ecumenical song as well. When Paul Winter described the making of the Earth Mass, he "wanted to create a mass that was both ecumenical and ecological, one which would embrace all the voices of the earth." While all the voices of the earth are not heard in the Mass, their diversity is extraordinary. It is unique, in fact. No previous Mass integrates as many different kinds of singers. In addition to human singers, a wolf, a whale, a seal, various birds and water are heard. Eight of the seventeen sections of Missa Gaia depend upon non-human singers. The variety of musical styles found in Missa Gaia is also unique. No other Mass is rooted in as many sacred music traditions. The music was shaped by traditions of North India, American Indian, Black American, Western European, Anglo-American, African and Afro-Brazilian. A variety of Western compositional styles influenced the music as well. Paul Winter described how, as he started to plan the Mass, he "began gathering recordings of great historical Masses, from Dufay, Machaut and Palestrina through Bach to Stravinsky, Poulenc, Kodaly and Britten." The Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Reverend James Morton remarked,

Paul Winter's Earth Mass, therefore, takes its place in the long historical tradition of liturgical music, beginning with the Hebrew chants of the synagogue and continuing with the Greek and Latin Gregorian chants of the early church, medieval plain-song, renaissance Palestrina, baroque Bach, classical Mozart and Haydn, romantic Beethoven and Berlioz, and contemporary Stravinsky.

As Dean Morton's comments indicate, for hundreds of years musically significant Masses were composed by individuals, not communities. Though one composer might base a Mass on another composer's melody, the final product was his/her work alone. Such Masses are, however, the exception. On a daily and weekly basis the Mass utilizes a prescribed liturgical text with music from various composers. Missa Gaia is close to the norm, since it too contains music by different composers. Paul Winter acted more as a chief architect than as a typical Western composer. In planning the Mass he asked Dean Morton, "Could a Mass

celebrate a vision of the entire Earth as a cathedral?" Dean Morton assured him that it could.

Great cathedrals embody communal thought and effort. No individual constructs a cathedral. Thus a cathedral embodies ecosophical ideas, for it is a sacred space made of interdependent units. A cathedral represents the universe. Missa Gaia is a musical cathedral because its genesis is rooted in interdependent communal musical action for a sacred purpose. More than half of the songs in Missa Gaia are not by Paul Winter. Others are either improvisations by Winter or are collaborations. Paul Winter described communal composition:

What we developed was an interweave of creative ideas from all the members of the Consort; and our process was self-balancing, by virtue of the common taste we share in our little musical tribe. While no one of us knew all of what was appropriate for the music of this Mass, together we found we did know.

Thanks to this cathedral community, ecosophists have their song and the world has its first truly ecumenical mass, a gift from the Winter Consort in the style and spirit of the late twentieth century.

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Note: Missa Gaia Earth Mass has been recorded by Living Music Foundation, Litchfield, Connecticut 06759.

ST. ANSEL OF YOSEMITE: A BRIEF EPITAPH

by Brian Peterson

Hardly a year has passed since the death of Ansel Adams, and already he has begun that long, slow journey into lasting fame, or oblivion, which is the fate of every well-known artist. His work, and his life, are now a fixed phenomenon, a neat package ready to be analyzed, appraised, and merchandised. Even while living, Adams was by far the best-known American photographer. He could perhaps have laid claim to being the most famous American artist in any serious medium. His work enjoyed the kind of widespread popularity rare among living artists, having entered the public consciousness so deeply as to be considered a form of popular culture. What well-appointed coffee table is complete without a copy of Yosemite and the Range of Light? Known among photographers, with and without affection, as "Saint Ansel," he was even naively credited in a recent interview with the "discovery" that photography is, indeed, an art form.

Now, with his death, the process of canonization has begun, as exemplified in a two-page spread in People Magazine hawking his various publications. The headline modestly proclaims "A LEGACY OF GENIUS, FOR ALL TO SHARE."

His fame notwithstanding, in recent years Adams has become a subject for debate in the photography community. It has become fashionable among the medium's literati to dismiss his work as a kind of sentimental pabulum, safe and inoffensive enough to allow for mass digestion, but ultimately not nourishing. While some see him as a weak-minded romantic, others see his prints as simply cold, technically-perfect descriptions of natural phenomena. His concentration on nature has led to the criticism that his work is not socially "relevant," and is a morally bankrupt attempt to escape from the hard realities of life. This attitude is exemplified in the words of the famous French photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson, "The world is falling to pieces, and Weston and Adams are doing pictures of rocks." No doubt some of these comments can be attributed to jealousy and to a tendency to knock our heroes "down to size." Their persistence, however, makes it hard to dismiss all of these criticisms as products of jealousy or

misunderstanding. It is interesting, then, to approach Adams' work with these two ideas in mind: his incredible fame and the nagging doubts about the real significance of his work.

A first look at any Adams' print usually brings forth a comment on his technical prowess. Each image is perfectly sharp, grainless, generally with a full range of tones from the richest black to the purest white. There is ample indirect evidence of the selective control of individual areas, as when prominent features are lightened, less prominent features darkened, all in harmony with a well-conceived visual logic. They are, simply, beautiful. In his writings Adams spoke ill of technique as an end in itself, referring to it as "playing scales at a concert." It is clear, nonetheless, both that he was a consummate master craftsman and that a flawless technique lay at the heart of his aesthetic.

Although Adams' work is dominated by classic magnificent landscapes, he often focused on smaller, more intimate scenes as well -- a group of Aspen trees, a burst of spray above a waterfall; and there are the simple formal studies reminiscent of Edward Weston. This refreshing variety in his point of view is augmented by a quality not often mentioned in Adams' "scholarship": a remarkably uncliché and free approach to visual design. A frequent tendency in dealing with the complexities of nature is to rely on compositional habits and formulas. But with Adams one looks in vain for the s-curved stream leading into the sunset, or the two solid tree trunks framing the sprouting fern. Instead, there is a noticeable freedom from such artificial restrictions. One image is dominated by a group of tree trunks which exactly bisect the frame, another consists of a mass of rushing water with few definable forms, while a third is composed of a set of delicate ripple patterns which extend with little variation across the entire frame. The designs seem to arise from the structure and movement of nature itself, rather than from any preconceived formal notions.

This perhaps provides a clue into the nature of the man. There is "gentleness" in his approach to composition. In the introduction to "Portfolio One" (1948), Adams contrasted the method of some photographers who "take reality as the sculptors take wood and stone and upon it impose the dominations

of their own thought and spirit," with others who "come before reality more tenderly," to whom a photograph is "an instrument of love and revelation." Clearly he considered himself in the latter category, and the lack of cliché in his compositions suggests that he was true to his words. One senses an uncluttered mind, uniquely open to both the experience and forms of nature. Such a heightened receptivity both allowed him to be spontaneous and freed him from the deadening formal clichés often observed in lesser workers.

However, it may be misleading to suggest that the subject matter predominates in Adams' work. After all, the same could be said about the most banal sunset snapshot. There is clearly something of Ansel Adams in these images. For example, "Mt. McKinley and Wonder Lake, 1947," shows a vast landscape containing a brilliant lake surrounded by darkened hills in the foreground, reflecting a huge, snow-covered, sunlit mountain which dominates the background. Yet this image is less a picture of a mountain, than an idea of a mountain -- an image of transcendental grandeur not unlike certain Frederick Evans photographs of cathedrals looming mysteriously over the English countryside. If Adams' own writings are an indication, he has most certainly changed the natural, "realistic" tones of black, white, and grey present in the scene in a deliberate effort to produce this effect. He is altering reality in an attempt to communicate an idea, or what he calls a "visualization."

He explains these intentions clearly when he states that "a photograph is not an accident, it is a concept." He doesn't mean a mathematical or even a philosophical concept, but rather a kind of experience, at once emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and, yes, physical -- a moment of perception in which the photographer sees something outside himself, clearly, yet sees it still within a very personal and symbolic context. Rather than a simple document or record, such an image is an expression of a relationship between photographer and subject. In other words, when Adams "sees" Mt. McKinley rising out of the valley floor like a vast, sunlit cathedral, he is expressing a truth about both himself and the mountain.

Yet one might ask, how can he be expressing the truth when, by his own admission, he is "lying?" That is, when the

essence of creative photography for Adams lay not in recording but altering reality. In reply, one may suggest that much great art is a gentle lie in the service of truth. As far as the specific "truth" contained in this particular image is concerned -- well, anyone who thinks a mountain is a lifeless piece of rock has never lived near one.

After such a spirited defense of Adams (as if he needs it!), I cannot escape a certain feeling of uneasiness. Adams was not without his flaws. One looks in vain in his non-nature, architecturally-oriented images for the same sense of freedom described earlier. Adams apparently relied more on both the formal and symbolic richness of nature than he himself was aware.

Furthermore, there is something quite safe and unimaginative in his approach to the problem of style. After viewing a number of technically-perfect, pristine prints, one begins to miss the sense of stylistic play which led another photographer (Ray Metzger) to interrupt his own pristine formal constructions by sticking his hand in front of the lens, or led Picasso to skillfully distort the human figure. Adams was not, ultimately, a pioneer, despite the fact that his early insistence on the unmanipulated image was somewhat revolutionary in its day.

At times, his writing does exhibit a gentle wisdom and passion, as in his response to a question about why there are no people in his images: "There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer." Or in his statement, "I have faith in people and believe it is our fault if we have not touched them with the best we have to give." Yet he at times exhibited a degree of ignorance which bordered on the embarrassing, as when he almost totally dismissed Rembrandt and in the same breath proclaimed Norman Rockwell to be the artist of the future.

Perhaps we should not expect him to be a scholar, but it is clear that, as an artist, he was somewhat one-dimensional. This may ultimately affect his standing in the celestial pantheon. At the same time it does not diminish the strength and beauty of what he did achieve. The fact remains that a viewer with any sensitivity to nature and any willingness to approach these images with the innocence of Adams can't help but be moved by his work. The photographs evoke, most of all, a sense of quiet. One's sense of time is

subtly altered, expanded, having been briefly touched by the larger, more patient rhythms of nature. If this experience causes the viewer to reexamine, even for a moment, the effect of the modern world on both his own psyche and on the environment, then one suspects that "Saint Ansel" is smiling up there in that "great darkroom in the sky." Herein lies the beginning of an answer to Cartier-Bresson's "moral" objection to Adams' work. There is a subtle moral statement (which Cartier-Bresson obviously missed) in the very fact that these photographs are idealized and "unrealistic." Critics of the media have said that a viewer can quickly become numbed by a constant barrage of images of man's inhumanity to both man and nature. But once seen and felt, Adams' tranquil and timelessly beautiful world is perhaps harder to forget. His best images allow one to experience, directly and privately, a sense of transcendental calm which is one side of nature. The viewer is then left to evaluate, in light of this experience, the world in which he or she lives.

As the months pass into years and today's crises become tomorrow's trivia, Adams' photographs -- like the products of any creative mind -- will be remembered or forgotten depending on the degree to which their real content can be appreciated by future generations. While the importance of the relationship between an artist and his or her own time can't be underestimated, this still must be considered the harshest test: is the substance of an artist's work so rich, so in touch with the most primal of human experiences, that it will still offer sustenance to untold future generations whose language and culture may be both unpredictable and unrecognizable? Here the competition, if one may call it that, becomes rather stiff. But it is in these turbulent waters that all artists must swim.

Whether Adams will sink or swim is best left to those who, by their care or neglect, will be his ultimate judges. In my opinion, Adams, like any artist, was engaged in that long groping struggle to communicate a small kernel of his own experience. Long after much of today's dry formalism and minimalism is consigned to the history books, Adams' best images will remain as living evidence that his effort was successful.

Brian Peterson is a free-lance photographer who lives in Philadelphia and teaches at the University of Delaware. Mr. Peterson has organized an exhibition of historic photographs which is now on tour but can be viewed at Lehigh University, February 28 through April 9, 1986. Brian, like Ansel Adams, has also known and loved mountains.

Catechism #1

Q: My smile swims slowly over a long
cheek
to an eye setting in dusk with its
twin-star
drowned in shade -- what's my name???

A: Your name is so far away from us,
but you marry the gray mountain
and cherish the earth even here.

Born in your air we cry;
bearing our dust you sigh.
You make twelve winds clear to us
as the warm cloud is bright to see,

cry on our downcast fruits and grains
and for our heart/mind and soul bring
rain
as we cry over mother's father's
headstones
to bless them.

Clothe us in directions so the way is
always known.

Teach us by lightning not to strike
the lowest women and men,
thunder us awake so loud we rise from
stupid fear
and pray you in, in every breath

of female sky.

Cayle

The Institute for Ecosophical Studies has as its purpose stimulating interest in and assisting development of philosophies of ecological harmony; encouraging, promoting, and publishing ecosophical writings, research, and art; providing opportunities for scientists and artists, philosophers and environmentalists to meet and discuss their respective perspectives on the earth-human process. Out of this study and dialogue will emerge an ecological wisdom that combines knowledge and sensitivity, objective investigation and subjective communion.

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