

A Howl For Thomas

Paul Winter

Paul Winter is a saxophonist and bandleader, and a student of the world's musics, dedicated to exploring ways music can celebrate the creatures and cultures of the whole Earth. He has recorded in wilderness areas of six continents, and with his ensembles has played concerts in 48 countries and recorded several dozen albums.

I was a beneficiary of Thomas's work even before I knew of him. My ensemble and I were invited to be artists-in-residence at New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine in the late '70s, in large part, I think, because of the ecological dimension of our music. I learned years later that Thomas had been the "guru" for the Very Reverend James Parks Morton, Dean of the Cathedral, in his mission to create a bridge between spirituality and ecology. And indeed Dean Morton built this bridge, throughout the '80s and up till his retirement in 1996, so that St. John's became known as "the Green Cathedral" and Jim Morton himself as "the Green Dean." The Consort and I were privileged to be along for this great ride, and we are honored to be playing there still today.

The first time I became aware of Thomas was when I received a copy of the poem he had written after attending our fourth annual Winter Solstice Celebration at the Cathedral in 1983. I was stunned. Not only was it evocatively beautiful, but Thomas intuited things that I hadn't even realized we were doing. He linked this celebration to a grander perspective, and this, to my mind, is one of his great gifts to us. Twenty-five years later, as we are preparing for our 29th annual Winter Solstice Celebration, this poem still stands as the greatest exposition of our event. May I quote two stanzas:

Morningside Cathedral

A barbarous setting
For Winter music
Gothic, Out of the
Dark Eurasian continent.
Vast, turbulent.

Pathos of Earth
Gothic dark Drumbeat
Heartbeat
Of a planet
Poignant as
Eternity come
Into time
Time resonant
With Eternity
Human cry
Wolf cry
Whale cry
Cathedral cry
Cry of the Sun
Sinking into darkness

Not long after this, I read Thomas's *Dream of the Earth*. Before this, my sense of historical perspective regarding our species' journey had been inspired by poet Gary Snyder, with whom we had done poetry-with-music tours in the 1970s. I noted that when Gary wrote a letter, he would date it 20th July, 41,977, and I asked him why. He said he felt it was more appropriate to date the period of contemporary homo sapiens from the earliest non-utilitarian art objects known, the 40,000 years old Magdalenian stone carvings of the caves in France. I liked that idea enormously, since it instantly gave a greater perspective on our journey than does the time-frame of the past 2,000 years. Then Thomas awakened us to the fact that our journey is really that of Earth itself, and this enormously expanded my embrace, so that I could now date my correspondence with the year 4,600,001,984. I liked this even better.

I finally met Thomas in the spring of 1985 at a bioregional conference in Kansas. We had a wonderful lunch conversation about the symbology of trees and my vision for a musical work celebrating tree reverence and sacred trees around the world. Thomas was enthusiastic about this project, and *The Tree* became an on-going topic of our dialogues for many years.

That summer I heard a rave review from a friend at the Cathedral about a talk that had been given there by cosmologist Brian Swimme. I learned Brian was a student of Thomas Berry, and that he lived in the Bay Area. Just before a flight to San Francisco for a concert, I happened to find in New York a copy of Brian's book *The Universe Is a Green Dragon*. I devoured this book on the plane ride and was so flipped-out by it that when I arrived at the airport I went to the first pay-phone, called back to the Cathedral for Brian's number, and rang him out of the blue. My enthusiasm must have been contagious, for Brian agreed to come to my concert at the Marin Civic Centre that night, where we met for the first time. Another of the great dialogues in my life had begun. *The Green Dragon* book, with its conversation between "Youth" and "Thomas," became one of my bibles. I bought cases of these paperbacks from Bear & Company, and gave the book to everyone I met. I even considered going door-to-door, competing with the Jehovah's Witnesses.

When Chez Liley and I were married on September 1, 1991, one of the most sublime gifts we received was a poem from Thomas, entitled "Appalachian Wedding." (Our hills in northwest Connecticut qualify as part of the Appalachian chain.) Thomas was unable to attend, so he sent this poem. No couple could ever hope for a more inspiring affirmation.

Thomas did come to our farm for a visit a couple years later, and I'll never forget walking him through our large barn, with its various rooms. My studio looked like a cyclone had blown through. There were piles of

boxes and music and albums, with papers strewn everywhere, literally dripping off the closed-lid of the grand piano like the limpid watches in Dali's painting. As we entered the room, I was about to be apologetic, but Thomas's face lit up and he exclaimed: "Ah! Creative disequilibrium!" I felt exonerated, and have ever since.

When *The Universe Story*, the great milestone collaboration between Brian and Thomas, came out in 1993, I was so fired-up that I ordered a case of these books and took them with me when I attended the Global Forum in Japan. I gave copies to all the journalists I could find, hoping they might be inspired, as I had been, to catch a ride on this grander wavelength.

Then in 1999 came Thomas's book *The Great Work*, which was for me an absolute revelation. Here Thomas puts forth the whole grand story of the world of our times, and outlines a path toward our life fulfillment as part of the greater community of the Earth. No book has ever given me more understanding of the historical realities that have shaped the world into which I was born, and at the same time evoked in me the "calm-fidence" to go forth on the path I've chosen (or rather the path that has chosen me). This book has become the principal bible for my life work. I have re-read it virtually every year in this last decade, and each time I realize we have only scratched the surface of what we might do with music, both to evoke a sense of this perspective of our being part of the journey and community of the Universe, and to awaken possibilities toward what Thomas refers to as "reinventing the human." *The Great Work* stands on my shelf alongside Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* as one of the seminal guidebooks of our time.

By the dawning of the 21st Century, I was convinced I had all the bibles I needed for this lifetime. (By now I had already included another stupendous book of Brian Swimme's, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*.) But then two years ago came Thomas's *Evening Thoughts*, and in it, of course, more green lights for my journey. So, ignited again, I thought: "Okay. One more for the bible shelf."

Something that hit me reading this book is the kindness that pervades all of Thomas's writing. This is his music, and implicitly one of his primary messages, I feel, along with the great embrace of his mega-perspective.

In April of 2005, cellist Eugene Friesen and I were driving through North Carolina en route to a concert, and we stopped in Greensboro to have lunch with Thomas. Later, I wrote down one of his many wonderful comments: "I get discouraged sometime by reducing things to ecology. It's a real 'made-for-music' problem. Music can assist us in changing our relationship with the Earth...a *fulfillment* relationship vs. a *use* relationship."

So for the umpteenth time, I felt we received a mandate from Thomas, for music, and the ways it might serve. And once again I felt the wind in my sails.

A howlelujah chorus of thanks to you, Thomas.

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The arch
Of the Cathedral
Itself takes on
The shape of
The uplifted throat
Of the Wolf
Lamenting our
Present destiny
Beseeching humankind
To bring back
The Sun,
To let the flowers

Bloom in the meadows
The rivers run
Through the hills
And to let
The Earth and all
Its living creatures
Live their wild fierce
Serene and abundant life.