

SACRED SOUNDS

**A homily given for Music Sunday
by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason
at UU Wellesley Hills on
Sunday, March 17th, 2019**

Please understand: this is not a customary Sunday service here at UU Wellesley Hills, not only because of the extravagant beauty of our music this morning — and many thanks to our joint choir for that gift — but because of the all the Latin. Latin is not commonly heard in our Sanctuary, but today the joint choir began with the traditional *Dona Nobis Pacem* sung in rounds and just concluded with a wondrous *Requiem*.

This *Requiem* was a piece that Gabriel Faure spent over a decade composing, a choral setting of the Latin mass for the dead. The earliest version of it had an 1888 premiere at the funeral of a French architect in Paris, but the final version of it was not published until 1901. “Everything I managed to entertain by way of religious illusion I put into my *Requiem*,” Faure wrote, “which moreover is dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest.” Everything!

In our Order of Service, the Latin lyrics for all seven of Faure’s movements were translated into English, although I doubt many of us were following along, nor were we intended to do so. As Faure himself

noted, he had written “a lullaby of death,” something that sounded notes of “a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above”. We are meant to be transported by his *Requiem*, not to scan for individual words or read the fine print of its promises.

Latin is tallied among the dead languages of the world, but like the greatest of these (Sanskrit, for instance, or Coptic), it has retained a stubborn purpose; it is still put to devotional and liturgical, religious and spiritual use. Quite often, a dead language is also a sacred language. In this way, although it is not widely spoken, it yet lives. It recalls time immemorial.

“All things rush on, they stop not, they look not behind, no power can hold them back, they rush on,” Indian mystic Rabindranath Tagore proclaims in his classic work, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*. “Keeping step... with that restless, rapid music, seasons come dancing and pass away - colours, tunes, and perfumes pour in endless cascades in the abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment.” Tagore’s *Gitanjali* was originally published in 1910, not too long after Faure’s *Requiem*.

Within a few years, Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and published his own translation of his poems into English. He was influenced by the *Upanishads* and other ancient scriptures; we hear echoes of them in the questions he poses us: “Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm? to be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy?” Although Tagore’s poems were read in English, they were sung in Bengali.

“[M]usic is God’s first language,” my friend and colleague the Rev. Dr. Victoria Weinstein had said, “and blessed are the makers of music and the singers of songs.” Blessed are they! Indeed, in the Books of the Hebrew Bible, whether in Exodus or the Psalms or the Song of Songs, we are made to understand that worship is played to a tune and requires us lifting our voices. We are directed to the lute, the harp, the lyre.

“O sing a new song to the Eternal,” the Psalmist tells us. “Shout praise... break into music and song!” Singing a new song to the Eternal is no easy thing, as musicians and ministers alike will tell you. One of the hymnals we use in this Sanctuary is titled *Singing the Living Tradition*. We need for our chants and rounds and anthems and hymns and offertories to connect us with religious tradition, but we want them feel alive in our own time, and to live well into the future.

The American poet Jack Gilbert writes, “we enjoy our lives because that’s what God wants.... /We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, /but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have /the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless/furnace of this world,” he declares. “We must admit there will be music despite everything.” Music sets our delight to time.

Being mere mortals, we do not despise what is fleeting - rather, we are brave enough to love it, for as long as it last. As Tagore tells us in *Gitanjali*, joy scatters and abounds. In our songs of gladness, we gather our joy up; in our songs of sadness, we bemoan its departure

or plead for its return. Either way, there will be music. Despite everything, there will always be music.

What is remarkable about Faure's *Requiem* is how little it sounds like a dirge. Instead, serenity pervades it. It seems to answer that petitionary Latin prayer: *Dona nobis pacem*, Grant us peace, peace in our place and time and also in the presence of what is perpetual and holy. It beautifully communicates that "very human feeling of faith" that Faure described, an undeniable trust in something supremely durable.

By Faure's request, his *Requiem* was played at his own funeral in Paris in 1924. By that time, it was already gaining renown. It continues to outlive him today. The female voices he originally intended to be heard can now sing the Latin passages that French churches required be assigned to choirboys. So here in this Sanctuary, we ourselves listen to a newer song to the eternal, one ringing in fuller harmony.

Choirs such as ours breathe life into a dead language and in doing so, remind us of all that is undying. For that - and for this service every Sunday - we thank them.