

The Music of Unitarian Universalists

"Music is what feelings sound like" (anonymous). "Without music life would be a mistake" (Friedrich Nietzsche). Both quotes are cited on the UUA "Worship Web" website. The article further asserts "Music is an integral part of our worship culture--whether that music be European classical or African American blues"

Jason Shelton, in his online Unitarian Universalist (UU) History "Changing the Words", examines the cultural/theological evolution of Unitarian Universalism through the changes in their hymnology. He notes that, in the nineteenth century, Unitarians and Universalists produced more than fifty (!) hymnbooks. In the latter part of that century, each of the denominations sanctioned publication of an "official" hymn book and following the consolidation of the two denominations in 1961, the UUA set about to produce its first hymnbook. Published in 1964, "Hymns for the Celebration of Life" combined the best of classic and contemporary hymnody with wording changed when necessary to fit the UU view of spirituality.

Donald Skinner in "Music Programs Key to Congregational Life" states: *We love diversity. It's there every Sunday in our worship services ... And thus it is with Unitarian Universalist music. On any given Sunday our music is as varied as we are. There are hymns by long-dead Europeans and by contemporary composers. There might be jazz or bluegrass or chanting.*

Skinner continues: *Two new UU hymnbooks in the past fifteen years have helped open the door to musical variety. The first, "Singing the Living Tradition", was published in 1993. "Singing the Journey", a hymnbook supplement, came out in 2005. The former book was inspired by the need to remove sexist language from UU music and to reflect the UUA's work in antiracism; multiculturalism; bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender issues; humanism; and a growing interest in spirituality. "Singing the Journey" was designed to supplement Singing the Living Tradition with more contemporary music.*

Both hymn books are divided into the following sections: Transcending Mystery and Wonder; Words and Deeds of Prophetic Women and Men; Wisdom from the World's Religions; Jewish and Christian Teachings; and Humanist Teachings. "Singing the Journey" adds a section, "Earth-Centered Traditions" reflecting our growing focus on environmental concerns and UU's seventh principle "respect for the interdependent web of which we are all a part". Development of new hymns for UU's is an ongoing process coordinated by the Unitarian Universalist Musicians' Network .

At the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara, as noted in our website

<www.unitarian-stcatharines.org> "music is an important part of our services. Lifting our voices in song gives us the spirit that binds us together in caring community". Our services include two hymns, usually from "Singing The Living Tradition", sung by the entire congregation. Many services also include one or two Choir pieces which might be from either hymnbook or from other sources including pieces composed by our own music director/choir leader, Penny Blake or by congregation member Sara Jordan. The particular pieces are intended to complement the theme of the service address.

In addition, music at our services includes a Prelude, Offertory Music and a Postlude. These are usually performed by our magnificent pianist, Theresa Pothier. While usually classical, the genre will vary to be consistent with the theme of the service. As well, from time-to-time other musicians in the congregation will perform the postlude. These can include, for example, flute, sax or guitar solos accompanied by Theresa. Sometimes we are treated to a solo performance by one or more of Theresa's students whose accomplishments at their young age are quite stunning. Special events held at the congregation will often include guest musicians to perform theme appropriate music. These performances have included e.g., aboriginal drumming, the Hamilton Gay Men's Choir and Shea D Duo.

As I hope the above portrays, we love diversity both in our theology and our music. Our services from September to June reflect this love. Our Summer services are usually informal discussions and often don't include music, but we have a very special musical event coming up. **You are invited to join the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara at 223 Church Street in St. Catharines, on July 14, 2013, at 11 am, for a concert by Max Chang, Taiwanese child prodigy and pipa (Chinese lute) performer. This free concert will be the main part of our service. Max will be accompanied on two selections by students of Theresa Pothier, Allysa Wu, violin and Terrence Wu, piano.**