

**Introduction to Performance of *Abyss of the Stars: A Mass for Voice and Guitar*
Alfa Art Gallery, New Brunswick, NJ
January 30, 2009**

We are excited to be a part of the one-year anniversary celebration of the Alfa Art Gallery with our friends Galina and Vesselin Kourtev, and we are particularly happy to have the chance to be involved with this event that highlights their Green Wave initiatives. They have a wonderful vision of bringing the arts together with science to raise awareness about global climate change and to inspire change here in New Brunswick and the world. Their vision fits perfectly with our own interest in bringing together science and music, which you will hear in the pieces we will perform tonight.

Our interest in exploring science through song is captured beautifully in a quote by the great American physicist and Nobel Laureate, Richard Feynman. He said, in an address in 1955 to the National Academy of Sciences, “Is no one inspired by our present picture of the universe? The value of science remains unsung by singers: you are reduced to hearing not a song or poem, but an evening lecture about it.”

We agree with Vesselin and Galina that the arts can move people in ways that lectures and data cannot. As a result, we are working with composers to create new music for voice and guitar through our Science/Music Commissioning Project, which seeks to further public understanding and appreciation of science by exploring the process of scientific discovery, celebrating the insights of a science-informed worldview, and illuminating the human side of science through song.

Science has not traditionally been a subject or source of inspiration for song. But the insights of science — evolution, quantum theory, the Big Bang, the structure of DNA, and so on — are beautiful, inspiring, and worth celebrating. We hope through this project to create music that will help to convey the beauty of science.

Tonight, we will perform three pieces from our first commission, *Abyss of the Stars: A Mass for Voice and Guitar*, written for us by Terry Champlin, faculty member at Mannes College of Music in New York City and Vassar College. The piece sets texts by several renowned scientists in the context of the traditional Christian mass. The juxtaposition of these texts alongside the Latin words of the mass highlights the sense of wonder and celebration that accompanies the scientific understanding of physical laws, human origins, and the evolution of the cosmos.

The first piece you will hear is the “Gloria.” It uses a poem by Richard Feynman in which he beautifully describes, in a few lines, the evolution of life on earth, starting from the lifeless molecules of the ocean, eventually forming the building blocks of living matter,

and finally leading to a creature itself able to contemplate this process and experience wonder at the ability to experience wonder.

Next is the “Credo,” which uses two quotes by Albert Einstein to convey the almost mystical nature of deep understanding of physical laws. And finally, the “Agnus Dei” uses a text by the Jesuit priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, which is in essence both a prayer and a celebration of the earth.

Unifying all these pieces is a sense of reverence these scientists had for nature — a sense that is very much needed now, in the growing climate crisis we face today.

— John Olson