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**Music of the (Hydro)Sphere: American Environmentalism
and Art Music from Hovhaness's "And God Created Great
Whales" (1970) to Adams's "Become Ocean" (2014)**

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When we try to pick out any thing by itself,
we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.
—John Muir (1911)¹

[T]he issue isn't so much that all places are connected
(one of the great clichés of modern environmental studies),
as it is understanding which connections are most important.
—Mitchell Thomashow (2003)²

The hypothesis of this paper is that the trajectory of environmentalism in the United States over the last four and a half decades has in general been from particulars to universals, from specifics to generalizations, from local issues to global concerns, and from description and storytelling to place-making and habitation. I am viewing this narrative cultural history through the lens of art music created over this time period—in particular Alan Hovhaness's *And God Created Great Whales* (1970)³ and John Luther Adams's *Become Ocean* (2013).⁴ After telling how these pieces came to be, and describing how they work musically, I'll compare and contrast them, and use their differences to support my theory about how environmentalism has re-envisioned itself over time.

***And God Created Great Whales* (1970)**

The year 1970 had huge significance for the American environmental movement. It saw the first international Earth Day observance, the debuts of the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the passing of the Clean Air Act, and the founding of advocacy organizations such as the Natural Resources Defense Council. Raymond Coffee wrote presciently in *The Nation* about the “manifest fervor” of the burgeoning movement: “The beleaguered environment is the kind of issue, some think, that might capture some of the idealistic spirit and the concern of young people as did the Peace Corps and Vietnam.”⁵

It was a recording released that year, however, that focused musical attention on the environment. Scott and Hella McVay's discovery of repetition and periodicity in whale sounds recorded by Frank Wattlington,⁶ a US Navy sonar specialist, resulted in the issuance of the LP *Songs of the Humpback Whale* by a California psychology press.⁷ Surprisingly, the record sold 100,000 copies fairly rapidly,

¹ John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Kitrinos Publishers, 2015), 154.

² Mitchell Thomashow, *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 194.

³ Alan Hovhaness, *And God Created Great Whales: Orchestra and Tape: Score*, Peters Edition 66322 (New York: C. F. Peters Corporation, 1970).

⁴ John Luther Adams, *Become Ocean for Orchestra* (Fairbanks, AK: Taiga Press, 2013).

⁵ Zoë Carpenter, “In 1970, Environmentalism Was Poised to ‘Bring Us All Together.’ What Happened?,” *The Nation*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/1970-environmentalism-was-poised-bring-us-all-together-what-happened/>.

⁶ As Rothenberg observes, while Wattlington was startled to conclude that the sounds he was hearing emanated from whales, he was hardly the first to reach the conclusion that whales make sounds. For an early example see William Gardiner, *The Music of Nature, or An Attempt to Prove That What Is Passionate and Pleasing in the Art of Singing, Speaking, and Performing Upon Musical Instruments Is Derived from the Sounds of the Animated World, with Curious and Interesting Illustrations* (London: Longman, Reese, Orme, Brown Green, and Longman, 1832), 382,

<https://ia600208.us.archive.org/27/items/musicnatureoran00gardgoog/musicnatureoran00gardgoog.pdf>. McVay's findings were published in the journal *Science* the following year. (Roger Payne and Scott McVay, “Songs of Humpback Whales,” *Science* 173, no. 3997 (August 13, 1971): 585–97.)

⁷ *Songs of the Humpback Whale*, LP Record (Del Mar, CA: Communications Research Machines, 1970).

eventually becoming the best-ever-selling environmental recording, with over thirty million copies pressed in various formats.⁸

The *Time* magazine reviewer struggled to describe the humpback sounds, saying they “might have come from the throat of a 40-ton canary to the rumble of a stupendous Model T with a cracked muffler.”⁹ The best verbal description comes from a poem by Stanley Kunitz:

You have your language too,
an eerie medley of clicks
and hoots and trills,
location-notes and love calls,
whistles and grunts. Occasionally,
it's like furniture being smashed,
or the creaking of a mossy door,
sounds that all melt into a liquid
song with endless variations,
as if to compensate
for the vast loneliness of the sea.
Sometimes a disembodied voice
breaks in, as if from distant reefs,
and it's as much as one can bear
to listen to its long mournful cry,
a sorrow without name, both more
and less than human. It drags
across the ear like a record
running down.¹⁰

Regardless of the strangeness of these sounds, when they became “trippy” they joined the mainstream, along with the budding environmental movement. They inspired the Judy Collins hit “Farewell to Tarpathie,” Pete Seeger’s “The Song of the World’s Last Whale,” and other folk and pop spinoffs.

The first person to recognize the potential of whale song for art music was New York Philharmonic conductor André Kostelanetz. Zoologist Roger Payne (founder of Ocean Alliance,) who gave Wattlington’s tapes to McVay, also approached Kostelanetz around the same time (i.e., in early 1970, before the LP was issued), thinking a “serious composer” should hear them. Kostelanetz in turn contacted prolific Armenian-American composer Alan Hovhaness. When Hovhaness met with Payne and Kostelanetz to listen to the tapes, he too was struck by the uniqueness and otherworldliness of the sounds, and was glad to be commissioned by the NYPO to write a piece based on the humpback songs.

David Rothenberg opines that “Kostelanetz probably chose Hovhaness because of the booming, Orientalist quality of his music, with its heavily orchestrated modal melodies. Hovhaness never went in for the experimental, atonal excesses of modern music, so it was a safe bet that he would produce something audiences would warm to.”¹¹ More likely, Kostelanetz could sense that whale song was about to become “the next big thing,” and wanted a composer who could produce a respectable piece quickly, so it could be premiered before recordings of the humpback songs became widely available.¹² Hovhaness was also successful enough at this point (largely due to the widespread acclaim garnered by his his second symphony, “Mysterious Mountain,” recorded by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under conductor Fritz Reiner) not to need much of a “commission,” writing the piece for roughly the amount that the copyists were paid to produce the instrumental parts.

⁸ When *National Geographic* reissued the disc as a “sound page” magazine insert a decade later, producing ten million copies for its various editions, it set another record, becoming the largest single pressing/release of any recording ever.

⁹ David Rothenberg, *Thousand Mile Song: Whale Music in a Sea of Sound* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 18.

¹⁰ Stanley Kunitz, “The Wellfleet Whale,” in *The Eco-poetry Anthology* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2013), 371.

¹¹ Rothenberg, *Thousand Mile Song*, 26.

¹² As it turned out, the piece was premiered around the same time the LP was released.

As much as he was enamored with the idea of basing a piece on whale songs, Hovhaness didn't want to use the actual taped sounds in the piece, preferring instead to imitate the whale songs using orchestral effects such as trombone glissandos.¹³ Kostelanetz insisted, and four segments of the Wattlington/McVey/Payne tapes were used in the piece. When Hovhaness played the resulting piece for the conductor, Kostelanetz thought it "too Oriental," quipping "The whales don't sing Oriental music."¹⁴ Hovhaness revised the piece somewhat, reusing a pentatonic theme from one of his early operas, but the "oriental" flavor persisted. It took him about two weeks to write it, after which he and Kostelanetz took almost as long coming up with a title, finally settling on a line from the biblical creation account: "And God created great whales..." (Genesis 1:21), the composer's Opus 229, No.1. The piece is scored for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, two Bb clarinets, two bassoons, four F horns, three Bb trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion (four players—glockenspiel, bass drum, vibraphone, chimes, tam-tam), two harps, strings, and tape.

Hovhaness described the work as follows:

"Free rhythmless vibrational passages, each string player playing independently, suggest waves in a vast ocean sky. Undersea mountains rise and fall in horns, trombones, and tuba. Music of whales also rises and falls like mountain ranges. Song of whale emerges like a giant mythical sea bird. Man does not exist, has not yet been born in the solemn oneness of Nature."¹⁵

Though he was in most senses a traditional composer, Hovhaness incorporated a number of improvisatory elements in his twelve-minute piece in addition to the taped sounds. It begins with fifteen seconds of tympani/tam-tam roll accompanied by rapid *ad lib* string scale passages (diatonic "white notes") marked as follows: "Strings continue repetition, rapidly and not together in free non-rhythm chaos, make one great cresc. or dim. as conductor directs."¹⁶ After a more traditional measured section (*andante*), *ad lib* scalar string passages (now with some chromaticism) underscore the first tape excerpt. Descending trombone *glissandi* (not to be entirely forsaken) marked "wild and powerful" add to the texture just before the second tape excerpt, which concludes against a backdrop of harp *glissandi*. A thirty-second segment featuring three solo violins in low- to high-pitch *glissandi* (inverting the trombone *glissandi*, and imitating the whale songs) introduce the third tape, underscored much like the first. Then follows a reprise of the traditionally-scored *andante* which preceded the first tape. The most complex of the *ad lib* sections—involving not only bidirectional scale lines in the strings, but flutter-tonguing, fast *glissandi*, and rapidly-repeated cluster dissonances in the upper register—introduces the final tape segment over a continuation of all that preceded it, *crescendoing* from *pp* to *ffff* at the end of the piece.

Kostelanetz premiered *And God Created Great Whales* with the New York Philharmonic on June 11, 1970, on one of the orchestra's "International Promenade" concerts; the same forces subsequently recorded it for Capitol Records. There are two additional recordings—with Gerard Schwarz and The Seattle Symphony for Delos,¹⁷ and with David Amos and the Philharmonia for Crystal. The latter recording replaces the original tapes with newer recordings of humpbacks, bowheads, and killer whales.¹⁸ While Hovhaness tired of the work (it became his most often-performed composition), he eventually

¹³ Lawrence Sobol, *Reminiscences from an Unsung Hovhaness Champion...: Lawrence Sobol Reminisces on 30 Years of Knowing and Working with Alan Hovhaness*, interview by Marco Shirodkar, August 2010, <http://www.hovhaness.com/Alan-Hovhaness-Lawrence-Sobol-interview.html>.

¹⁴ Alan Hovhaness: *The Composer in Conversation with Bruce Duffie*, interview by Bruce Duffie, audio transcription, August 1, 1985, <http://www.bruceduffie.com/hovx.html>.

¹⁵ Seattle Symphony and Gerard Schwarz, *Alan Hovhaness: Mysterious Mountain; And God Created Great Whales [CD Liner Notes]* (Hollywood, CA: Delos, 1994).

¹⁶ Hovhaness, *And God Created*.

¹⁷ As co-principal trumpeter in the NYPO (from 1972-77), Schwarz played *And God Created Great Whales* when the orchestra again programmed it for International Promenade concerts on May 1974. Later as a conductor, Schwarz became one of the composer's greatest advocates.

¹⁸ Philharmonia Orchestra and David Amos, *Alan Hovhaness: And God Created Great Whales (for Orchestra with Actual Songs of Whales); Concert No. 8 for Orchestra; Anahid (Fantasy for Chamber Orchestra); Elibris (Dawn God of Urardu); Alleluia and Fugue [CD Liner Notes]* (Sedro Wooley, WA: Crystal Records, 1989).

agreed (in 2005) to add choral parts, creating yet another edition of the piece, which was performed at the Vancouver Aquarium—with orcas in the audience—and filmed for the documentary *Whalesong*.¹⁹

***Become Ocean* (2013)**

Forty-two years later, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (dubbed “Rio+20,” relating back to the 1992 “Earth Summit”) convened in Rio de Janeiro. In the outcomes statement, points 158-180 addressed “Oceans and Seas” specifically, opening with this statement:

We recognize that oceans, seas and coastal areas form an integrated and essential component of the Earth's ecosystem.... We therefore commit to protect, and restore, the health, productivity and resilience of oceans and marine ecosystems, and to maintain their biodiversity, enabling their conservation and sustainable use for present and future generations....²⁰

Only two years previously the second-worst oil spill in history occurred in the Gulf of Mexico, when an explosion at a deep-water rig caused the release of an estimated 210 million gallons of oil, galvanizing world attention over the 87-day course of uncapped flow.

Post-minimalist American composer John Luther Adams had written a piece in 2007 entitled *Dark Waves* for two pianos and electronic sounds that he refashioned into an orchestral work (also with recorded sounds) for the Anchorage Symphony in his home state of Alaska. About the same time he was commissioned to write a piece for the Seattle Chamber Players, which later caught the attention of the Seattle Symphony's young French music director designate Ludovic Morlot. The new conductor wanted to update the orchestra's sound and image, and commissioned Adams (in 2011) to extend the ideas from *Dark Waves* over a longer span into a major orchestral work.²¹

Adams started work on his magnum opus *Become Ocean* in 2012 against the backdrop of Rio+20, as tsunami debris from the Japanese earthquake/nuclear meltdown began washing up on the Pacific coast of the US, and as environmentalists marked the fiftieth anniversary of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. What emerged was a 42-minute one-movement work for a large orchestra seated in three sections, which the composer termed “a meditation on the vast, deep, and mysterious tides of existence.” *Become Ocean* was premiered by Morlot and the Seattle Symphony in June 2013, a performance repeated at Carnegie Hall in May 2014, and it won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Music. The same forces also recorded the work, and that recording won the 2015 Grammy Award for Best Classical Contemporary Composition.

Listening to *Become Ocean* live is intended to be immersive experience (no pun intended). Though the light projections the composer originally envisioned didn't materialize (at least until the New World Symphony performances in 2015²²), there is certainly a visual/spatial aspect to this work, which begins with the positioning of the players. From the audience perspective, the woodwind grouping—three flutes, three oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), harp, marimba, vibraphone, and crotales—is clustered at the back of the stage on the left. The brass grouping—four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, harp, marimba, and vibraphone—is in the back on the right. The string grouping—with all parts divisi (including basses, with one part tuning the lowest string down a step), three bass drums, tam-tam, suspended cymbal, tympani, celeste, and piano) is front and center, spread as widely as possible, and as close to the lip of the stage (i.e., as far from the other groupings) as possible.²³ The marimbas, vibraphones, harps, celeste, and piano are miked, with each attached to a separate amplifier adjacent to the instrument, so each can sound as part

¹⁹ Rothenberg, *Thousand Mile Song*, 27.

²⁰ United Nations Environment Programme, “The Future We Want: Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 27 July 2012,” Pub. L. No. 66/288 (2012), 30, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/66/288&Lang=E.

²¹ Tim Greiving, “Seattle Conductor Ludovic Morlot at the Helm of the L.A. Phil for ‘Become Ocean,’” *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 2015, sec. Entertainment / Arts & Culture, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-ludovic-morlot-la-phil-become-ocean-20151113-story.html>.

²² Lawrence Budmen, “New World Plays Pulitzer Winner Adams’ Riveting Score,” *Miami Herald*, December 11, 2015, sec. Performing Arts, <http://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/performing-arts/article49290345.html>.

²³ Adams, *Become Ocean*, ii.

of its group. The composer comments, “Each of the orchestras occupies its own physical space, its own harmonic space and has its own instrumental color.”²⁴

The tempo is unvarying (and relentless—marked “inexorable” at the outset) throughout the entire length of the piece, with four one-second-long beats in each of the 631 measures (hence 42 minutes). To maintain the tempo exactly, the composer specifies the use of a click-track, which the conductor can follow either visually or through headphones, and which can also be distributed to the percussionists, harpists, pianist and celeste player. Thus the performance can be tightly “synchronize[d]” even when the “three orchestral choirs [are] moving in cross-rhythmic relationship.”²⁵

The piece is a bit like three different periods of waves or tides, rising and falling, ebbing and flowing, each in its own time. From time to time two of the orchestras crest or rise together. At three moments, all three of the orchestras crest at the same time, creating three tsunamis of orchestral sound.²⁶

The title of the piece comes from the final two words of the mesostic poem “Many Happy Returns,” written by composer John Cage to honor fellow composer Lou Harrison:

first the quaLity
 Of
 yoUr music

 then
 its quAntity
 and vaRiety
make it **R**esemble
 a rIver in delta
 liStening to it
we bec**O**me
 ocea**N**²⁷

The score and the CD liner feature the following epigraph by the composer: “Life on this earth first emerged from the sea. As the polar ice melts and sea level rises, we humans find ourselves facing the prospect that once again we may quite literally become ocean.”²⁸

Become Ocean has received a number of renditions in its relatively short life. In the latter part of 2016 it was performed in Spain, Finland, Italy, and the US, and it will be premiered in the Netherlands later this spring by the Rotterdam Philharmonic. A segment of *Become Ocean* was incorporated into the soundtrack for the 2015 movie *The Revenant*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio.

Similarities Between These Two Pieces

The Pacific Northwest

One of the most obvious congruencies between *And God Created Great Whales* and *Become Ocean* is their connection with the Pacific Northwest—beginning with the composers themselves. Though Hovhaness grew up in the Boston area and eventually taught at the Boston Conservatory, a stint as composer-in-residence with the Seattle Symphony in 1966-7 convinced him to move from New York to Seattle in the early 1970s; he lived there the rest of his life, in a home with an inspiring view of the Cascade Mountains. Though his music was championed by internationally-known conductors like Stokowski, Kostelanetz, and Reiner in the 1950s and 60s, it fell out of fashion on the eastern seaboard,

²⁴ John Luther Adams, John Luther Adams: The Pulitzer Prize-winning composer on his piece *Become Ocean*, interview by Rebecca Franks, radio, November 11, 2014, <http://www.classical-music.com/article/john-luther-adams>.

²⁵ Adams, *Become Ocean*, ii.

²⁶ Adams, Pulitzer.

²⁷ John Cage, “Many Happy Returns,” in *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 6.

²⁸ Adams, *Become Ocean*, inside front cover.

and most of his later orchestral works were premiered, performed, and/or recorded by the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and music director Gerard Schwartz. Many of these works (e.g., the “Mt. St. Helens” Symphony, No. 50, Op. 360) had specific programmatic connections with the northwest.

Though he lived for four decades in Alaska (itself more broadly part of the “Pacific Northwest,” by some definitions), and wrote his music for more than a quarter of a century in the same 16-by-20-foot one-room cabin in the taiga,²⁹ Adams has also had a productive relationship with the Seattle Symphony, which premiered, toured and recorded *Become Ocean*. (Adams currently divides his time between an apartment in Harlem and a rented home in the Mexican Sonoran desert—where, curiously, he wrote *Become Ocean*.) Adams’s music again featured prominently in the SSO’s June 2016 Tuning Up Festival of American music, during which Morlot programmed another two of the composer’s works. Adams comments:

What I find especially appealing about the SSO is its openness and fearlessness. Some of that perhaps originates with the conductor, but I think it also comes from the creative outlook of the musicians. There’s a uniquely Seattle attitude toward orthodoxies — an attitude with which I have a real affinity — and I think that’s audible in the sound of the orchestra.³⁰

People are looking to Seattle as a model for the new orchestra, for what the symphony orchestra might be in the 21st century and how it might not just survive but thrive and expand the arts world.³¹

In the introduction to his book *A Song to Save the Salish Sea: Musical Performance as Environmental Activism*, Mark Pedelty explains why the Pacific Northwest “just happens to be where some of the most interesting environmentalist art is taking place....It represents a rich environmentalist tradition. Greenpeace is just one of several groups that got its start in the heart of Cascadia.”³² On the experimental music front, Pedelty reminds us that R. Murray Schafer’s World Soundscape Project was housed at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, and that the Orca Sing on San Juan Island continues its annual experiments with “interspecies performance.”³³ Truly this is an area with unique significance for both the environmental movement and for contemporary art music (not to mention the folk/pop/rock music which is the subject of Pedelty’s book).

Environmental Focus

And God Created Great Whales and *Become Ocean* and were both written to advance a particular environmental cause—the former to publicize the plight of whales, and the latter to fight global warming. Though certainly not the only piece to draw attention to whales and their songs³⁴—and obviously secondary to the “voices” of the whales themselves as issued on the *Songs of the Humpback Whale* LP—Hovhaness’s work introduced the idea of whale song to new audiences, and thus played a part in the very successful campaign to outlaw commercial whaling.³⁵ Global warming and climate change continue to be

²⁹ John Luther Adams, “Leaving Alaska,” *The New Yorker*, June 17, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/leaving-alaska>.

³⁰ Thomas May, “The Seattle Symphony Tunes up to John Luther Adams during the Final Stretch of Its American Music Festival,” *The Seattle Times*, June 27, 2016, sec. Classical Music | Entertainment, <http://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/classical-music/the-seattle-symphony-tunes-up-to-john-luther-adams-during-the-final-stretch-of-its-american-music-festival/>.

³¹ Maggie Stapleton, “Album of the Week: Become Ocean (Seattle Symphony & Ludovic Morlot),” *Second Inversion: Rethink Classical*, September 29, 2014, <http://secondinversion.org/2014/09/29/album-of-the-week-john-luther-adams-become-ocean-seattle-symphony-ludovic-morlot/>.

³² Mark Pedelty, *A Song to Save the Salish Sea: Musical Performance As Environmental Activism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), 6. He might also have mentioned the work of the Marine Conservation Institute, headquartered in Seattle.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15, 16.

³⁴ John Tavener’s cantata *The Whale* (1966) for chorus and orchestra and George Crumb’s *Vox Balenae* for clarinet, cello, and piano (1971) are two of the most prominent other works on this same theme composed around that time.

³⁵ Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC) calls the International Whaling Commission ban on commercial whaling “one of the greatest environmental success stories of the last hundred years.” Only Japan, Norway, and Iceland currently allow some form of commercial whaling. (“Stop Whaling: Introduction to Whaling,” WDC (*Whale and Dolphin Conservation*),) The National

controversial politically, but *Become Ocean* has certainly found a place in that conversation. The Pulitzer committee called it “a haunting orchestral work that suggests a relentless tidal surge, evoking thoughts of melting polar ice and rising sea levels.”³⁶ The recording contract was partially funded by a PledgeMusic drive, with 5% of the proceeds donated to The Ocean Conservancy.³⁷ Hearing the recording, pop singer Taylor Swift was inspired to donate \$50,000 to the Seattle Symphony for its education programs and its musician pension fund.³⁸

Performing Forces

In terms of performing forces, both pieces utilize large orchestras, and divide them into “choirs”—visually and spatially in *Become Ocean*, and less obviously in *And God Created Great Whales*. Both composers employ these tonal and dynamic resources sparingly; there are only a few (climactic) points at which all the performers play simultaneously.

John Cage

Both composers are indebted to iconoclast avant-garde composer John Cage, whose philosophical musings and aphorisms (perhaps more than his music) cast a long shadow over twentieth-century art music, with continuing influence in the twenty-first century. *Become Ocean* has the most obvious connection, taking its name from a Cage poem. But Adams, as much a prose stylist as Cage, writes about Cage’s impact at a much more fundamental level:

I’m no longer interested in making music *about* anything.

With characteristically radical elegance John Cage defined music as “sounds heard.” The idea that music depends on sound and listening might seem as self-evident as the idea that we human animals are an inseparable part of nature. But both these simple truths challenge us to practice ecological awareness in our individual and our collective lives.

Cage’s definition of harmony was “sounds heard together.” Listening to the multiplicity of sounds all around us all the time, we learn to hear the marvelous harmony they create. Hearing this harmony we come to understand our place of our human voices within it. [Adams’s italics]³⁹

Oddly it is *And God Created Great Whales* that owes more to Cage in terms of compositional technique, however, using aleatoric means (which Cage pioneered, and with which he was most famously associated) to some degree. When Cage and Hovhaness first met in the mid-1940s after a concert of Hovhaness’s music in New York, Cage was very enthusiastic about what he heard.⁴⁰ Later, however, Hovhaness came to believe that Cage had been co-opted by the art music establishment:

He was a very good composer when he was young. But then he went and saw Boulez, and he said, “Emotional music is written to show how emotional the composer was when he wrote it, and intellectual music is written to show how intellectual the composer was who wrote it,” and that way he destroys everything.⁴¹

Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) was formed in October 1970, only a few months after the premiere of *And God Created Great Whales*.

³⁶ “Become Ocean, by John Luther Adams (Taiga Press/Theodore Front Musical Literature): The 2014 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Music,” *The Pulitzer Prizes*, 2014, <http://www.pulitzer.org/winners/john-luther-adams>.

³⁷ “John Luther Adams: Become Ocean,” *PledgeMusic*, n.d. <http://www.pledgemusic.com/projects/becomeocean>.

³⁸ Brendan Kiley, “Taylor Swift Donates \$50,000 to Seattle Symphony,” *The Seattle Times*, December 3, 2015, sec. Classical Music | Entertainment | Local News | Music.

³⁹ John Luther Adams, “Making Music in the Anthropocene: How Should Artists Engage with Times of Crisis?,” *Slate*, February 24, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/02/john_luther_adams_grammy_winner_for_become_ocean_discusses_politics_and.html.

⁴⁰ Allan Kozinn, “Alan Hovhaness, a Composer Whose Vast Catalog Embraced Many Genres, Dies at 89,” *The New York Times*, June 23, 2000, sec. Arts, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/23/arts/alan-hovhaness-a-composer-whose-vast-catalog-embraced-many-genres-dies-at-89.html>.

⁴¹ Hovhaness, Duffie Interview. Curiously, Hovhaness’s and Cage’s piano compositions shared a 1947 LP release played by Armenian-American pianist Maro Ajemian, a friend and compatriot of Hovhaness. (Eric Kunze, “Alan Hovhaness: A

Spirituality

Though neither piece is specifically religious, both composers aim at some sort of “mystic resonance” which they feel is characteristic of these pieces. Hovhaness’s official biography tells us that “[l]ater in life he claimed some mystical experiences had brought him whole musical sections [of some pieces]. The mystical and religious preoccupations of many works reflect a pantheistic spiritual outlook...which mirrors exactly the huge diversity of his musical influences.”⁴² Critic and fellow composer Virgil Thomson agreed: “Its expressive function is predominantly religious, ceremonial, incantatory, its spiritual content of the purest.”⁴³ In his obituary for the composer Stacy Kors observed that “[v]irtually all of Hovhaness’s major compositions are religious or mystical in tone;”⁴⁴ *And God Created Great Whales* is certainly no exception, according to Allan Kozinn: “[H]is awe of nature was simply a manifestation of his religious devotion. And indeed, often the two are clearly intertwined...*And God Created Great Whales* (1970), is both devotional and picturesque.”⁴⁵

Similarly, many listeners and commentators have noted a have noted a mystical or ritual bent in Adams’s music—and in *Become Ocean* in particular—which isn’t entirely subconscious:

We make this distinction between sacred space and quotidian space, but I don't think it needs to be that way....I've been in touch for most of my life—pretty directly in touch—with these elemental forces that are so much bigger and more powerful, not only than I am, but than I can even imagine. And that can be both terrifying and profoundly reassuring. For me, that's pretty close to religious experience.⁴⁶

In his book *Winter Music*, Adams writes, “I have faith. But it has no name. My faith is grounded in the earth, in the relationships between all beings and all things, and in the practice of music as a spiritual discipline.”⁴⁷ That discipline it would seem finds its largest-scale outworking in *Become Ocean*.

Popular, Critical, and Professional Reception

Both pieces have enjoyed popular success, while dividing critics and performers. *And God Created Great Whales* is Hovhaness’s most-performed piece—and is tied with *Mysterious Mountain* as his most-often-recorded work. (The Crystal Records recording headlining *And God Created Great Whales* is the best-selling CD in that small independent label’s catalog.) While he lamented its ubiquity, the composer had to admit that this piece’s popularity with listeners illustrated one of his oft-quoted aesthetic principles—which might be termed audience-friendliness or accessibility: “My purpose is to create music, not for snobs, but for all people...”⁴⁸ While *Become Ocean* has only received one recording thus far, it is being performed a great deal (see above).

The critical response to both pieces has been mixed. While some commentators waxed poetic in their praise (“From the din, a pentatonic melody emerges, preparing the way for four recorded songs of the great humpback whale...The result is a haunting portentous depiction of earth as it emerges from its

Discography: 8 March 1911 - 21 June 2000: In Memoriam” December 2013, 49, 50, <http://www.hovhaness.com/HovDiscog%202013.pdf>.)

⁴² Marco Shirodkar, “Alan Hovhaness Biographical Summary,” *The Alan Hovhaness Web Site: The Online Resource for the American Composer*, n.d. <http://www.hovhaness.com/hovhaness-biography.html>.

⁴³ Charles Amirkhania, “Alan Hovhaness, 1911-2000,” *Other Minds: Revelatory New Music*, n.d. <http://www.otherminds.org/shtml/Hovhaness.shtml>.

⁴⁴ Stacy Kors, “American Composer Alan Hovhaness Dies at 89 Inspired by Nature, He Wrote Thousands Of Works And Melded Eastern, Western Musical Styles,” *MTV News*, June 22, 2000, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1071385/american-composer-alan-hovhaness-dies-at-89/>.

⁴⁵ Kozinn, “Vast Catalog.”

⁴⁶ John Luther Adams, An Inviting Apocalypse: John Luther Adams On “Become Ocean,” interview by Arun Rath, radio broadcast, September 28, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2014/09/28/350911062/an-inviting-apocalypse-john-luther-adams-on-become-ocean>.

⁴⁷ John Luther Adams, *Winter Music: Composing the North* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 144.

⁴⁸ Shirodkar, “Alan Hovhaness Biographical Summary.”

primordial chaos.”⁴⁹), and Kostelanetz remembers critics being “on the whole, receptive” to the “new language of sound”⁵⁰ utilized in *And God Created Great Whales*, that assessment wasn’t broadly shared. A *New York Times* reviewer wrote that the piece “can veer toward kitch,”⁵¹ and the *Gramophone* review of the Schwarz recording was scathing:

With its fluent use of gimmicks, it would be easy to mock this, starting as it does with an aleatory twitter which leads on to pentatonic doodling of a kind that one improvised as a child on the black keys of the piano. Then comes the first of the tapes of the songs of the great humpback whale, recorded specially, followed by the first huge climax, very impressive except that the pentatonic melody which roars out on trombones (leading to whale-song imitations) is not distinctive enough, almost banal, punctuated by glockenspiel.⁵²

The most-often-quoted review of *Become Ocean* is the rave by Alex Ross in *The New Yorker*:

Become Ocean is [Adams’s] most ambitious effort....its three huge crescendos, evenly spaced over the three-quarter-hour span, suggest a tidal surge washing over all barriers. It may be the loveliest apocalypse in musical history.... Anyone who has secretly wished, during the swirling stasis that opens the “Ring,” that the music would go on like that forever will find much to love in *Become Ocean*.⁵³

While indeed most reviews follow at least somewhat in this vein, *Become Ocean* also has its detractors. In David Hurwitz’ review of the recording for *Classics Today*, he opined that “John Luther Adams writes music that lacks any trace of human feeling. It is ‘process’ music—cold, implacable, but often very beautiful in its way, as here.” He could not however abide the messaging of the piece or the pretentiousness of the packaging, which made him “want to let these two discs [i.e., the CD and the DVD] become coasters.”⁵⁴ Harvey Sachs’ review of the New York premiere is even more negative: “[T]he piece made me feel I was drowning, not in the ocean but in Lethe’s waters...ambient sound *ad infinitum*....I wished that someone’s cellphone would go off to bring some relief to the proceedings....I have a hard time with murk and mysticism.”⁵⁵

Finally, but not trivially, performers’ responses to both pieces have been mixed as well. There is anecdotal evidence that a significant contingent of SSO members intensely dislike performing *Become Ocean*, as it is difficult and requires extraordinary attention and control to execute the intricate rhythms as Adams has notated them; assumedly for others endurance—and the production of the overall effect—is its own reward.

In the case of *And God Created Great Whales*, the New York Philharmonic archives preserve several violin and bass parts with derogatory (though often humorous) notations penciled in by the original players. One bass player added to the composer’s byline at the top of the score “(who also created bursitis)” and at the end noted “quick, run out and get bow re-haired.”⁵⁶ Under the scalar passages at the

⁴⁹ Quoted in “Review of 1) Mysterious Mountain 2) And God Created Great Whales: Composer: Alan Hovhaness (U.S. 1911-2000),” *Many Strings*, n.d. <http://www.many-strings.com/music-ed/information-for-teachers/mysterious-mountain-and-great-whales>.

⁵⁰ Andre Kostelanetz, *Echoes: Memoirs of Andre Kostelanetz* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 196.

⁵¹ Larry Rohter, “A Composer Echoes in Unexpected Places,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2011, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F01EFDE103CF935A35752C1A9679D8B63&pagewanted=all>.

⁵² Edward Greenfield, “Hovhaness Orchestral Works,” *Gramophone*, n.d. <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/hovhaness-orchestral-works-1>.

⁵³ Alex Ross, “Water Music: John Luther Adams’s ‘Become Ocean,’ at the Seattle Symphony,” *The New Yorker*, July 8, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/07/08/water-music-3>.

⁵⁴ David Hurwitz, “John Luther Adams: Become Ocean, Minimally,” *Classics Today.com*, <http://www.classicstoday.com/review/john-luther-adams-become-ocean-minimally/>.

⁵⁵ Harvey Sachs, “Conductors, Salt Water, and Pratifalls,” *Hudson Review* 67, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 307–13, 352.

⁵⁶ Alan Hovhaness, “Hovhaness, Alan / And God Created Great Whales - Double Bass” (C. F. Peters Corporation, 1970), 7, 19, AK2082 2910-105, New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives, <http://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/artifact/75450560-730f-4db7-b1f8-17118238773d/fullview#page/6/mode/2up>.

end of the score, one violinist wrote, “Don’t stop till end,” supplemented after the final measure by a call for “Help!”⁵⁷

Contrasting Aspects of These Two Pieces

Once again there are some differences which are obvious. *And God Created Great Whales* is shorter, with clearly delineated sections. *Become Ocean* is longer (3.5 times as long), and intended to be heard in a single uniform span, with overlapping “waves” of sound. The Hovhaness piece utilizes actual recorded sounds from nature,⁵⁸ while the Adams piece relies entirely on traditional orchestral instruments (albeit amplified in some cases). *Become Ocean* is tightly controlled, with every aspect calculated and accounted for, so that each performance will be largely the same. *And God Created Great Whales* depends a great deal on the improvisation of the players and the timing/interpretation of the conductor. (Hovhaness even allowed for variation in the whale song recordings used.) Thus every performance is intended to be *sui generis*.

Live Performance vs. Recording

While Hovhaness would have assumed that *And God Created Great Whales* is best experienced live in the concert hall, only secondarily through recordings, Adams intends for the recording of *Become Ocean* to add an additional element of experience not available to the concertgoer:

The ideal scenario for the listener in a performance of this piece is to be surrounded by the orchestra and furthermore have the opportunity to move around within the physical space, if desired....“In making this recording we took special care to mix in stereo much of the time, so that the experience of hearing this music in stereo is as vivid as possible and gives you a sense of being immersed.”⁵⁹

Mixed and mastered for stereo and 5.1 surround sound, *Become Ocean* is a truly immersive experience that is meant to be felt at an emotional level. “What I want for you as a listener,” Adams explains, “is to be right in the middle of the orchestra. *Become Ocean* lends itself very well to putting you in the middle of this ocean of sound, with these three sections of the orchestra ebbing and flowing, rising and falling, crashing over and swirling around each other. It rumbles the floor and tickles your backbone, and at the same time, you feel the depth of the waves and the spray of the sea. That’s what I’m reaching for.”⁶⁰

Programmatic vs. Immersive

Somewhat less apparently, *And God Created Great Whales* is depictive and programmatic in the sense that each section is supposed to sound like and/or simulate and/or consciously associate with a natural feature or creature, while *Become Ocean* is intended to enable the listener to become a part of what s/he hears. Adams explains his concept of “sonic geography” as follows:

[T]here’s [a] ... sense in which the notion of landscape limits our understanding and experience of place.... [F]or many of us landscape is something we view from a distance: within the frame of a painting or a photograph, on a television set or a movie screen, or through the window of a speeding automobile. Such encounters with place can be thought provoking and inspiring. All too often they’re sadly superficial.

In whatever sense we understand the concept of landscape, landscape alone is no substitute for the authentic personal experience of fully *being* in a place....Over the years my music has led me beyond

⁵⁷ Alan Hovhaness, “Hovhaness, Alan / And God Created Great Whales - Violin 1” (C. F. Peters Corporation, 1970), 38, 39, AK2082 2910-101, New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives, <http://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/artifact/cbec351e-ab94-4c2c-80bc-9da566c2a429/fullview#page/38/mode/2up>.

⁵⁸ As Yolande Harris observes, “[u]nderwater is perhaps the most pertinent example of a sonic environment that is only perceivable to humans with the aid of technology.” Yolande Harris, “Scorescapes,” *Leonardo* 48, no. 2 (2015): 117–23.

⁵⁹ Stapleton, “Album Week.”

⁶⁰ “Become Ocean by John Luther Adams,” *Bandcamp: Cantaloupe Music*, n.d. <https://johnlutheradams.bandcamp.com/album/become-ocean>.

landscape painting with tones into the territory of “sonic geography”—a region that lies somewhere between place and culture, between human imagination and the world around us.⁶¹

While Hovhaness would definitely have seen his music as “music of place,” he wouldn’t have shrunk from the idea of musical landscape or tone painting. Furthermore, even his most “grounded” music reflected the influence of the Eastern musics he experienced and loved (India, Japan, China, Korea) as well as his ancestral Armenian ethnic and liturgical music. No matter the subject or locale, his was more a “music of *places*.”

Tuneful vs. Minimalist

While most of Hovhaness’s music is unabashedly tonal, it differs drastically in sound from Adams’s proto-tonal post-minimalism. Put simply, Hovhaness wrote tunes, and Adams does not. “I believe melody is the spring of music,” Hovhaness wrote. “Without melody, I don’t have much interest in music.”⁶² Contrast Adams’s statement about his “outdoor” pieces: “Rather than a single point of interest, every point around the aural horizon is a potential point of interest, a call to listen.” Concerning his compositional technique, he writes, “...I begin by combining intervals into chords and modes, building my palette of harmonic hues.”⁶³ Alex Ross explains that the “majestic sonorities” of *Become Ocean* emerge from a musical machine, an inexorable process.... The work is a gigantic palindrome, ending where it began.⁶⁴

Corollary vs. Overt Messaging

Finally, despite Hovhaness’s occasional (and feeble) attempts to cast himself as an environmentalist (the *Time* reviewer at the premiere of *And God Created Great Whales* wrote that the composer “beamed like an ecologist, announcing that we’ve got to preserve everything we can on this planet. It’s God’s own little spaceship. Everything counts.”⁶⁵), *Become Ocean* comes off as preachy; *And God Created Great Whales* does not. Adams, who was executive director of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center in the 1970s, gave up environmental activism to write music—but only with the thought that with his particular gifts, writing music is how he can accomplish the most. Adams realizes that inclusion of a clearly-articulated message concerning global warming in the *Become Ocean* score, on the CD jacket, and in the program notes could possibly actually take away from the effect of the music itself.⁶⁶

If my work doesn’t function powerfully as music, then all the poetic program notes and extra-musical justifications in the world mean nothing. When I’m true to the music, when I let the music be whatever it wants to be, then everything else—including any social or political meaning—will follow.... However, the last thing I want is to limit the listener’s imagination. If a listener feels constrained by any words I may offer along with the music, then I encourage her to ignore them.⁶⁷

While Hovhaness aimed to paint a picture of the whales and let them tell their story, Adams wants to immerse us in these great creatures’ vanishing environment. Hovhaness is *visiting* the place Adams wants us to *live*.

⁶¹ Adams, *Winter Music*, 23, 24.

⁶² “Alan Hovhaness,” *The Telegraph*, July 4, 2000, sec. Obituaries, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1346477/Alan-Hovhaness.html>.

⁶³ Adams, *Winter Music*, 149.

⁶⁴ Ross, “Water Music.”

⁶⁵ Rothenberg, *Thousand Mile Song*, 26.

⁶⁶ This is clearly the case for Hurwitz: “Let me say straight out: there is nothing that I hate more than being preached at, especially by artists. Few groups are less qualified, ...and since untexted music is utterly incapable of expressing an idea as abstract as the consequences of global warming, never mind “become ocean,” Adams’s little homily only distracts the attention from what his music does in fact do, and do well.” (“Become Ocean, Minimally”)

⁶⁷ Adams, “Making Music.”

Possible Parallels With the History of Environmentalism

As I indicated at the outset, I'd like to conclude this paper with some musings on larger issues, which I hope might prove fodder for thought and conversation. In listening to these two pieces and reflecting on how they came about, while also gaining some sense of the trajectory of ecomusic and environmentalism over the decades that separate them, I have come to wonder if there is some corresponding evolution this music might help to describe.

Historian J. R. McNeill observes that "[E]fforts to limit pollution of the oceans suffered from two problems: the perception that their size negated any ill effects, and the oceans' international character."⁶⁸ These difficulties were overcome to a large extent by nascent environmentalists—not so much by the publication of Rachel Carson's *Sea* trilogy (one forgets that she was a marine biologist by profession)—but by describing and telling the story of one facet of sea life, i.e., illuminating the existence and "personality" of the largest denizens of the deep. Once whales were heard (singing, no less) and visualized, their habitat became significant to the general public, and substantial changes ensued.

It seems that many early environmentalist efforts centered around informing people of the real plight of endangered species, showing the specific effects of deforestation, illustrating habitat destruction and elimination, etc. This seems to me much like the world of *And God Created Great Whales*, full of picturesque places ideal for framing, and brimming with stories demanding to be told.

In recent years, however, attention has shifted to larger, more general issues such as global warming and climate change. While scores of conservation agencies still exist, and continue to serve an important function, groups like Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, and the Sierra Club now work mostly behind the scenes, lobbying governments to enact changes. The narrative has changed to an extent that it's really not so much a narrative, or a picture, but a place. The Anthropocene era is upon us, and in a sense it has brought the natural world home. This is for me analogous to Adams's music in *Become Ocean*. The composer's hero Thoreau phrased it this way:

It is something to be able to paint a particular picture or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour.⁶⁹

In terms of technology as well there has been a transformation (as in virtually every other field). While photography, videography, audio recordings, and ecotourism remain important, one could argue that social media, big data, computer modeling, polling, and simulation have become indispensable to the environmental movement. UCLA English professor Ursula Heise (quoting McKenzie Wark), explains how this preoccupation with digital bits and bytes contributes to the overall thrust of contemporary environmentalism:

The capabilities of such software tools, Wark argues, make it possible for users to understand the consequences of even minor changes in one variable for the system as a whole, and thereby enable an understanding of global ecology that is very difficult to attain through direct observation and lived experience: "It is only by becoming more abstract, more estranged from nature that I can make the cultural leap to thinking its fragile totality," he concludes.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ J. R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 146.

⁶⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, ed. William Rossi, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 64, 65.

⁷⁰ Ursula K. Heise, "From the Blue Planet to Google Earth: Environmentalism, Ecocriticism, and the Imagination of the Global," in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195335637.001.0001/acprof-9780195335637-chapter-2>.

However, as ethicist Alasdair MacLean reminds us, “I can only answer the question, 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”⁷¹ As the narrative changes from the stories of individual species and places to a data-derived global simulation, activism, and individual involvement may suffer.

Also the sense of place has limits which may not be breached, despite any and all attempts at immersive communication—even through music. Following from William James’ discussion of the perception of space, British music sociologist Tia DeNora asserts the following:

Music’s aural features occupy only time but they are heard and come to constitute material and social space. Unlike visually locatable materials, such as instruments, furnishings, or people, all of which occupy particular spatial dimensions, albeit sometimes moveable from one to another place, music, like scent or aroma, may be diffused across an entire space at once. In this sense music is a *global* condition of a social space for all who can hear it....[DeNora’s italics]⁷²

While this principle undoubtedly contributes to the transmission of whale songs (sometimes for more than one thousand miles from the source), one wonders if its borders are infinitely elastic, or whether to be “global” (i.e., all-encompassing) music must be localized to the listener (in performance or recorded), so cannot be “global” (worldwide) in its import, and is thus not a suitable vehicle for immersing (locating) listeners in a cause such as “global” (worldwide) warming.⁷³

In one of Hovhaness’s most oft-quoted remarks, he indicated that his purpose in writing music was “[t]o attempt what old Chinese painters called 'spirit resonance' in melody and sound.”⁷⁴ In a film of his own making, contemporary British artist David Hockney displays and describes a 17th-century Chinese scroll, relating its richness of incident to the approach the artist and his assistants took to perspective.⁷⁵ Remarkably, the longer one looks at the scroll (and furls and unfurls it in a continuing journey), the more one recognizes that the viewer’s perspective is that of an insider, seemingly inhabiting the painting, free to look and observe all around herself. Despite his “resonance” with ancient Chinese art, Hovhaness’s music more closely resembles the Canaletto painting which Hockney contrasts with the scroll, with its clear Western vanishing-point perspective. Hovhaness depicts natural elements and creatures in wonderful detail (even realistic or photographic detail—in the case of the whale recordings), but the listener stands outside and looks (listens) on. For better or worse, like the Chinese scroll, Adams takes us inside. What is unclear is whether or not we are able to benefit from the perspective he allows us, or instead somehow get ‘swallowed up’ in the process.

Similarly there was a wonderful clarity about the goals and intentions of the early environmental movement. The causes could be viewed from a safe distance, described, framed, tamed, and conquered. The victories were easy to see and count. For better or worse, there is more of coalescence today, and we all live in the maelstrom. Will we find our new “inside” perspective illuminating, or daunting? Will we be bored, or tantalized? Will we, in the end, in Thoreau’s words “affect the quality of the day”?

⁷¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Second Edition*, 2nd edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

⁷² Tia DeNora, *Music-in-Action: Selected Essays in Sonic Ecology*, New edition (Farnham: Routledge, 2011), 190.

⁷³ This of course refers back to centuries-old arguments about whether music is in some sense a “universal language.”

⁷⁴ Shirodkar, “Alan Hovhaness Biographical Summary.”

⁷⁵ Philip Haas, *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China or Surface Is Illusion but So Is Depth*, documentary (Milestone Films, 1988).

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