

**SOLAS:Vespers**

**Sola Scriptura**

**Oct. 14, 2018**

**Welcome**

**Yuri Hooker**

Good evening! Welcome to our very first SOLAS:Vespers service. My name is Yuri Hooker. The first question that I'm guessing that many of you are asking yourselves is: "Just what is it that I have come to tonight?" Those of you who thought you were coming to a concert may be looking at your programme and thinking: "What's this I'm reading about a sermon?" Those of you who thought you were coming to church may be looking over your

bulletin in confusion and thinking: "Boy, that was a long offertory...and where was the collection plate...that song was a little melodramatic for church...it certainly didn't seem *worshipful* to me..."

I sympathize with your disorientation. It's taken me years to sort out in my mind just what this dream I've had is, and who it's for, and why anyone—besides me—would want to set aside time to participate in it?

Because it's true that SOLAS:Vespers straddles what you could call the "entertainment" world, and what you could call the "religious" world. That is, you *could* call them

that, but to do so would make it much harder to understand what it is that we are doing here tonight, compartmentalizing the arts as a harmless diversion, and faith as a grim duty: archaic, albeit quaint...

But “the arts”, at least in my estimation, are a vital expression of what it means to be fully human. It is by making art that we pose our most profound questions about the nature of existence, and express our perplexing and unshakeable longings: for meaning, for acceptance, for security.

By the same token, “religion” seeks to answer those same perplexing desires for meaning,

acceptance, and security: it provides a narrative framework for meaning; it places us in communities where we find acceptance, not only with other people, but more significantly, with God; and it offers us the hope that, whether or not we experience peace or prosperity in this lifetime, ultimately good will overcome evil, life will conquer death, and all our heart’s longings will be fulfilled in ways that we could never have imagined.

The arts, and music specifically, provide us with a tangible bridge between what we *sense* to be the truest part of ourselves and physical reality, which—on the one hand—is often seen as the only knowable truth,

but on the other is often dismissed as inadequate, raw material to be manipulated and bent to our supreme will.

The desacralizing agenda of the modern era has disenchanting and dismembered our wholistic sense of self, severing the material from the spiritual, the secular from the sacred, private truth from public knowledge.

Music, singing in particular, and even more fundamentally, singing that affirms transcendent truth, helps to reintegrate the whole. Our usually skittish inner selves begin to emerge surfing on waves of sound, merging, converging, with our bodies. The

outward façade, the dressed set, becomes inhabited.

It is at this nexus of hope and longing that SOLAS:Vespers lives. SOLAS: Vespers is an attempt to bring together our two most powerful experiences of transcendence, in the case of the arts, reaching towards it; in the case of religion, descending from above.

Of course, it's not just any "religion" that I'm talking about. The two words, "solas" and "vespers", refer specifically to the Christian faith. "Vespers" is of course one of the ancient hours of prayer that have been observed continuously for millenia. It is a connection to a living tradition that

goes back before the earliest days of the church, at least to the writer of the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm, who professes ardent devotion to God by claiming: “Seven times a day I praise you...” (119:164) So “vespers” is a self-conscious reminder of our unbroken connection with the worshippers and the rhythms of worship that stretch back to the days when parts of the Bible had not yet been written!

The word “solas”, on the other hand, is by comparison a recent term, though to us it’s still rather old. The Latin word “sola” means “only” or “alone”, and during the Protestant Reformation the “solas” referred to five theological principles that

expressed the ways in which Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin felt the church needed a course correction. They were: *sola scriptura*, or Scripture Alone; *sola fide*, By Faith Alone; *sola gratia*, By Grace Alone; *solus Christus*, By Christ Alone; and *solus deo gloria*, To the Glory of God Alone. Each represented a repudiation of practices and assumptions which had crept into the church. At least they were a reassertion of priorities that had often been neglected. Their conviction was that neglect of these priorities threatened the Gospel, that is the central message, the Good News, of Christ. Having engaged on a massive study both of the newly

available biblical text in its original languages, as well as the writings of the early Church Fathers, they saw the *solas* as a means of gaining access to the Christian faith as it had been understood in the earliest incarnations of the church, not in order to try and go backwards in time, but to apply the principles to their own cultural moment.

And that is also what I hope to do with SOLAS:Vespers—not to pretend that we can return to some imagined Golden Age, whether the 1<sup>st</sup> century or the 16<sup>th</sup>, but to assert these principles once again and apply them to our own lives, our own cultural moment. Some of that application will

seem profoundly counter cultural, perhaps even that I'm seeking to return to a pre-technological state, That is emphatically not my intention. That said, just as there were common practices and assumptions in the 16<sup>th</sup> century which the Reformers attacked with vigour because they threatened to obscure the central truths of the Gospel, SOLAS:Vespers will aim to challenge the conventional wisdom of our age, the “progressive” dogmas of an advanced, technologically obsessive society, which assumes that any and all innovation is an unassailable good.

You just listened to the first movement of a string quartet by

Mendelssohn. At the very beginning of the piece, the 18-year-old Mendelssohn quotes a song to which he had likely written both the music and the lyrics: “Is it true?” he asks, “Is it true that over there, always, you are waiting: in the doorway, at the vine-covered wall, and with the moonlight, and the starlight, asking earnestly after me? Is it true? O, speak! What I feel can only be felt by one who feels with me, who stays with me, ever faithful, ever true.”

The song fragment, expressing Mendelssohn’s deepest longing, is succeeded by the extremely turbulent music which we just played. Longing expressed stirs up equally potent

doubts and fears. The next movement from the quartet which we will play in about 15 minutes time similarly alternates between deep assurance—written as a slow, stately hymn—and breathless despair—a quickening pulse and wild rhythm and melody. The whole piece inhabits the borderland of unsatisfied longing and scarce hope, and so is a good jumping-off point for SOLAS:Vespers.

On a practical note, if you’ve looked at your service booklet ... you may have noticed that in a few moments we will be singing... together, and my hope is that you will join me in singing lustily. Whether or not the tunes are familiar to you,

whether or not you read music, whether or not you approve or agree with the words, whether or not you feel self-conscious, my prayer is that you will try to lend your voice to the whole. The more people who participate, the more glorious the sound will be. There are some wonderful things in life that can't be accomplished or experienced outside of a group, and choral singing is one of them.

Secondly, by now you will have realized that there is no amplification being used. If you want to move closer to hear me better, please do so. If you want to move farther away to avoid hearing me drone on, feel free. Still, I

will do my best to speak clearly and slowly, so that even if you're sitting somewhere where my voice is faint, my words will be understandable.

Thirdly, if you'd like to ask about why we're not using amplification, or about anything else connected to the service, we'll be having a Q&A after the service. So please stay if you're able, enjoy some refreshments, and after about 15 minutes of visiting we'll quiet down and I'll do my best to answer your questions in a semi-coherent way.

Finally, this service has been made possible by the incredible generosity of my fellow musicians, who are listed in the insert in your

booklet, and I just want to thank them right now. (applaud) Thank you. Please feel free to express your further appreciation to them after the service, but it would be our preference if no other applause was offered to us during the service.

It has been so encouraging to know right from the beginning that I have colleagues and others who believe in what we're trying to do with SOLAS:Vespers. If you would also like to show your support and help us defray some of our costs, I would be most grateful. We have provided a small envelope in your service booklet for that purpose which can be

deposited in the small, clear box that was on the table as you entered.

NOW, before we proceed any further, I'd like to bow for a word of prayer to dedicate this entire endeavour to God and his glory.