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YOU ARE INVITED TO MY FUNERALS

A Paper Presented to the SpheX Club of Lynchburg, Virginia
March 4, 2010

By James M. Elson

(See introductory bio on the following page.)

INTRODUCTORY BIO FOR JIM ELSON,

SPHEX MEETING, MARCH 4, 2004

Jim Elson was born in the Borough of Manhattan, New York City. Although his parents were natives of New York State, he was taken south of the Mason-Dixon line at a tender age.

Jim was educated in the public schools of Knoxville, Tennessee, and went on to graduate from what is now called the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. After two years of active duty in the United States Army, he returned to New York, the city of his birth, for graduate study, then spent a year in Europe on a Fulbright Grant.

In the course of an academic career covering over twenty years Jim received a doctoral degree. Still, he is reluctant to be known as “Dr. Elson,” because he is “not a doctor who can do you any good”-- like Jeff Wilson and Graham Gilmer. Similarly, since twenty-eight years of his thirty years of military service were spent in the reserve, he does not consider himself a real colonel--like Bill McIntosh.

Jim thinks this is a long enough introduction, since you will soon hear about his adventures during the past twenty-six years, after he left the ivy-covered walls of academia and came to live in Lynchburg.

The title of Jim’s paper tonight is “You Are Invited to My Funerals.”

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CD player turned on for CD.

Yes, you are invited to my funerals—plural. No, it's not a typo. There will be two of them. It is my intention to describe them to you tonight. Perhaps I will get some feedback from this distinguished audience, while I am still around to make adjustments. I will admit that I do not feel the urgency to do this nearly as much as I did this past October. Still, as many of you know, one of my favorite mantras is "Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance."

But first a little background is in order to put this *necessarily abbreviated* version of the envisioned ceremonies in proper perspective.

My family and I first moved to Lynchburg in 1984, twenty-six years ago this year, when I was engaged as the first executive director of the Academy of Music Theatre. Most of you would not remember that, for it was probably not until I became the Executive Vice President of the Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation in 1988 and started writing articles for *Lynch's Ferry*, our magazine of local history, that I began to achieve a *small* bit of local renown.

So, there are probably no more than two or three of you who would know the two things that have considerable bearing on my decision for duo funerals. The first is that for twenty years before coming to Lynchburg I was a professor of music and an arts administrator at several colleges and universities. The second is that my wife Joan Scott Elson, the mother of my three children, died of breast cancer in February 1991. Joan and I had been married twenty-five years. Sue Porter and I were married in August of the following year and this summer will celebrate our eighteenth anniversary. I can honestly say (although I may be mixing my metaphors) that in these two ventures into the field of matrimony I struck gold both times

About two and a half years ago, Sue and I began to think about funeral and burial arrangements. The Old City Cemetery had recently opened its new chapel. Actually, it was not so new. It was made from materials from a nineteenth-century Methodist church in Appomattox County and modeled after one of the same vintage in Bedford County. Nevertheless, it had an attractive newly created columbarium in its ground level. It occurred to me that since we planned to be cremated, a portion of my ashes could rest there with Sue's (whom I would almost surely predecease), while the remainder would join Joan's in the columbarium at St. John's Episcopal Church. Sue was agreeable to this arrangement.

Hoping that folks will attend two funerals for one person is perhaps wishful thinking. But, I reasoned, if the funerals are short (about 40 minutes each), different in character, yet close to each other in time and distance, perhaps a few adventurous souls might attend them both, if only out of curiosity. And thus began my prior planning.

My first concern was the music. This was important to me, for I have been to and even participated in funerals where the music was an embarrassment, often in terms of both selection and performance. I had no intention of having that happen at either of mine. Joan's funeral nineteen years ago at St. John's had certainly set a high standard, which I do not hope to equal. An ensemble from a select choral group from Greensboro, NC, in which we had both been active members, arrived at close to 100% strength and performed beautifully.

However! Thanks to the talents of our son Scott, who holds degrees in both electrical engineering and music production, I have in my possession some reasonably good CD recordings from my days as a choral conductor. Over the last couple of years, Scott has miraculously saved and restored them from ancient, almost forgotten, reel-to-reel tapes. If I was going to write—or at least supervise—the scripts of my funeral services, why not select and perform the music as well?

Eventually the following plan developed: Upon my death an obituary will contain the usual information and will conclude:

A memorial service will be held at the Old City Cemetery Chapel with interment of ashes in the chapel columbarium, followed by a service at St. John's Episcopal Church, with interment of ashes in the St. John's columbarium. Notification of the date and times will be given in this column in the near future.

Within a week or two of the obituary an announcement will appear indicating a 9:30 a.m. service at the Old City Cemetery and an 11:00 o'clock service at St. John's. It will mention that the two locations are a ten-minute drive apart, and that each service will be about 40 minutes in duration and will feature recordings of appropriate musical selections by various college and community choral groups directed by the deceased during his career as a professor of music.

The music at the Old City Cemetery chapel service will be performed by the Huntingdon College Singers, a group I directed when I was Chairman of the Department of Fine Arts at the college, located in Montgomery, Alabama. The recordings were made under relatively good acoustical conditions in a professional recording studio in Birmingham and were heard on a radio program titled "The Bishop's Hour." The bishop was Methodist, as was the college.

Music before the service begins will include the American Folk Hymn: "When I Can Read My Title Clear to Mansions in the Skies." The text is on the first page of your handout.

Insert CD, Play track 1. One and ¾ minutes. Sphex listeners will have copies of the texts of all the music on the recordings. TO TRACK 3—STOP.

The African American spiritual "Ain'a That Good News" was arranged by the long-time director of the Tuskegee Institute Choir, William L. Dawson. I had sung many of Professor Dawson's arrangements during my high school and college days. During the 1970s the Huntingdon Singers and I had the pleasure of meeting Professor Dawson, then in retirement, and performing some of his music for him. He was very kind in his appraisal of our efforts, although obviously we sounded nothing like his nationally-famous Tuskegee ensemble.

Play recording, TRACK 3, one and ¼ min. TO TRACK 5--STOP.

The service at the Old City Cemetery will be presided over^{By} a close family friend, Harry, who is an excellent master of ceremonies. Harry will begin by introducing members of the family and explaining the circumstances of the two funerals, by telling those assembled that it was my intention to “rest in pieces” with my two beloved wives.

Harry will go on to inform those present that I have asked each of my three children to read one of my favorite poems. Elizabeth, the media person, will begin with “When Earth’s Last Picture Is Painted” by Rudyard Kipling:

Elizabeth reads:

:

When Earth’s last picture is painted and the tubes are twisted and
dried,
When the oldest colours have faded, and the youngest critic has died,
We shall rest, and, faith, we shall need it—lie down for an eon or two,
Til the Master of All Good Workmen shall put us to work anew.

And those that were good shall be happy; they shall sit in a golden
chair;
They shall splash at a ten-league canvas with brushes of comets’ hair.
They shall find real saints to draw from—Magdalene, Peter, and Paul;
They shall work for an age at a sitting and never be tired at all!

And only the Master shall praise us, and only the Master shall blame;
And no one shall work for money, and no one shall work for fame,
But each for the joy of the working, and each, in his separate star,
Shall draw the Thing as he sees It for the God of Things as They are!

Harry then announces that Scott, the electrical engineer and music man, will read "When I Heard the Learned Astronomer" by Walt Whitman and state that I intended it to be heard as an encouragement for those present to find or to hold on to something transcendental in their lives.

Scott reads:

When I heard the learned astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much
applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
'Til, rising and gliding out, I wandered off by myself,
In the mystical moist night air, and from time to time,
Looked up in perfect silence at the stars.

Harry then will state that, as the final poem, I have asked that Christina, the archaeologist and anthropologist, read Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar," which reflects my hope for the afterlife. Harry will also make it clear that the bar in the poem is a sand bar:

Christina reads:

Sunset and evening star, and one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar, when I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep, too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell, and after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell, when I embark.

For though from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.

[It has occurred to me that I could have included Robert Frost's "Chose Something Like a Star" to go with the stars in the preceding poems. But I then I thought, "I've already chosen "something like a star to stay my mind on and be staid." And I don't have a recording of any of my choirs singing "Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown, When at evening the sun goeth down, When I wake with the blest in the mansions of rest, Will there be any stars in my crown?":

So, Harry will conclude the ceremony with this:

After the benediction, you are invited to come with us to the beautiful columbarium in the basement of this chapel for the placement of Jim's ashes. You are also invited to attend a short memorial service and the placing of his ashes in the columbarium at St. John's Episcopal Church beginning at 11 o'clock. If you need directions, just ask me or any member of the family.

Finally, Jim wanted you to know that if he could place an epitaph on either of his burial niches, he would borrow Benjamin Franklin's, which—with a little editing—would read:

The body of James Martin Elson (like an old book, its contents torn out, its cover stript of its lettering and gilding, and reduced to ashes) lies here. Yet the work itself shall not be lost, for it will (as he believed) appear once more in a new and beautiful edition, corrected and amended by the Author.

Jim also asked me to thank you for coming today and to express his hope that the remainder of your days will be as blessed as was his life. And now our benediction sung by Jim's Huntingdon College Singers:

Play Track 5. The Choir Sings: 1 ½ minutes. TO TRACK 7, STOP.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord lift his countenance upon you and give you peace
The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you.
Amen.

Before beginning the next part of my paper, I must digress briefly and tell you a story from my early years as a professor of music, when I volunteered to teach music appreciation classes during summer school to augment my munificent salary of—I think it was--\$6,000 a year.

I may have learned more from the experience than my students. At the beginning of the first chapter of our textbook, there was a “Peanuts” cartoon:

Schroeder comes home carrying a package. Lucy says, “Whatcha got there, Schroeder?”

“It’s a new Beethoven record,” says Schroeder (today that would be a CD)..

“Whatcha going to do to it?” says Lucy.

“I’m going to listen to it,” says Schroeder.

“You mean you’re goin’ to dance to it?”

“No, I’m just going to listen to it,”

“Are you going to march around the room while you listen to it?”

“No, I’m going to sit and listen to it,”

“You mean you’re goin’ to whistle or sing while you listen to it?”

“No!” says Schroeder. “I told you. I’m just going to *listen* to it!”

“WHY THAT’S THE MOST RIDICULOUS THING I EVER
HEARD!!”

It was then I began to realize that most people, whether they know it or not, feel the same way as Lucy—I would guess around 90% of the general population. But since *Sphex members* are, of course, better educated, more cultured, and (dare I say it) somewhat older than the general population, I imagine the percentage of the musically challenged here tonight is far less. However, if you *should* find that you are having trouble concentrating on any of the musical selections that follow, due to their length or complexity, just remember that musical intelligence is like any other kind of intelligence—an unfathomable combination of nature and nurture. *And* you have the texts to help you stay your minds on the sound. That is one of the many beauties of vocal music

Now, on to the service at St. John’s.

Those of you who are familiar with the Episcopal Church and its Book of Common Prayer will know that music, readings, and prayers must conform with the Episcopal Liturgy. To avoid possible problems after my death in this regard, about two years ago I submitted a proposed program following the Book of Common Prayer's Rite I Funeral Service to the Rev. Michael Sullivan, who was at the time, St. John's rector. He assured me *in writing* that my selections "complied with all the rubrics." This past summer, after four years of a very successful ministry, Michael departed St. John's for a larger parish in the Atlanta area. This fall, when I had to undergo major surgery, I made sure that the remaining clergy were aware of the approved manuscript of my funeral liturgy on file at the church.

Son Scott will be in charge of playing the musical selections over the sound system located in the balcony of St. John's sanctuary. The selections are taken from his restored recordings of uncut public performances of choral groups I directed during my college teaching days, performed in, as you will hear, a *variety of acoustical environments*.

Three selections will be heard before the service starts. The second is "The Blessed Son of God" by the Englishman Ralph Vaughan Williams, a composer much honored by the Anglican Church

Play track Seven. 3 minutes. To Track EIGHT. STOP.

The last number before the service begins will be Anton Bruckner's "Ave Maria," which is the most beautiful setting of this text I know. The Montgomery Civic Chorale, was a select group from both the community and Huntingdon College, which I organized and directed from 1973-1976. I was particularly fortunate in having an unusually strong men's section, which always contained several excellent singers from the Air Force Command and General Staff College at nearby Maxwell Air Force Base.

Play track EIGHT. 2 ¼ minutes. To Track NINE. STOP. QUICK!

Following the service's opening prayers, I have selected from the suggested list of Old Testament readings The Wisdom of Solomon, Chapter 3, verses 1 through 5 and verse 9. It will be read by my daughter Elizabeth:

Elizabeth reads:

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction. But they are in peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself. . . Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his elect.

Here the liturgy indicates that "a suitable canticle or a psalm be said or sung." I have chosen "For He Shall Give His Angels Charge Over Thee" from *Elijah* by Felix Mendelssohn. [2 ¾ min.]

Play TRACK 9: 2 ¾ min. To TRACK 10. STOP – QUICK!

Next the liturgy prescribes "A Reading from the New Testament." This will be from the First Letter of John, chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, read by my daughter Christina.

Christina reads:

See what love the Father has given us; that we should be called the children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

After the New Testament reading, the Book of Common Prayer states that “a suitable canticle or hymn, or one of the following Psalms may be sung or said.” One of the psalms listed is the twenty-third, with which, I believe, most of you are familiar. Here is Franz Schubert’s beautiful, setting sung in 1971 by the then-Winthrop College Choir.

Play track 10. 5 ¾ minutes. TO TRACK 11. STOP Quick.

It is here in the service that a selection from one of the gospels is read by the presiding clergy person. Rev. Sullivan went along with my request to break or at least bend the rubrics a bit by approving a selection not suggested by the Book of Common Prayer—but one which I believe to be the most important passage from any of the Gospels: Matthew, chapter 22: verses 34 through 40.

The presiding clergy person reads:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it. ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

“A homily may be preached, the people being seated” states the liturgy after the reading of the Gospel. My note to whomever conducts the service is as follows: “No homily here and no eulogy, please (Eulogies often prompt folks to say things that are not precisely true and are sometimes embarrassing to the deceased.) A few words of welcome will probably suffice. Before the concluding prayers, the minister will announce that I have requested that he or she and the congregation remain in the sanctuary until the final “hallelujah” of the postlude, then adjourn to the columbarium for the committal of my ashes.

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The postlude of the service as well as the conclusion of tonight's paper will be Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" from *Messiah*. If you have comments or questions concerning this paper, I'll take them after you have listened to all three minutes and forty seconds of it.

Track 11, Play 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ min. Turn off player.

TEXTS, MUSIC FOR ELSON FUNERALS

Old City Cemetery Funeral
Music by the Huntingdon College Singers (1972-76)

* * * *

“When I Can Read My Title Clear,” American Folk Hymn
Tune “Pisgah,” arr. Alice Parker; Words Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

When I can read my title clear to mansions in the skies,
I'll bid farewell to every fear and wipe my weeping eyes.

Should earth against my soul engage, and hellish darts be hurled,
Then I can smile at Satan's rage and face a frowning world.

Let cares like a wild deluge come, and storms of sorrow fall,
May I but safely reach my home, my God, my heav'n, my all.

There shall I bathe my weary soul in seas of heav'nly rest,
And not a wave of trouble roll across my peaceful breast.

* * *

“Ain'-a That Good News,” American Spiritual, arr. William L. Dawson (1899-1990)

I got a crown up in-a the Kingdom, ain'-a that good news!
I'm a-goin' to lay down this world, goin' to shoulder up-uh my cross,
Goin'a take it home-a to my Jesus, ain'-a that good news.

I got a robe up in-a the Kingdom, ain'-a that good news!

I got a Saviour in-a the Kingdom, ain'-a that good news!

* * *

“The Lord Bless You and Keep You,” Peter C. Lutkin, American (1858-1931)
Text: Numbers: 6: 24-26

The Lord bless you and keep you,
The Lord make His face to shine upon you.
And give you peace.
The Lord lift his countenance upon you.
And be gracious unto you.
Amen.

TEXTS FOR ST. JOHN'S FUNERAL MUSIC ON THE BACK

Elson Funeral at St. John's Church

"The Blessed Son of God" from *Hodie (This Day)* by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958), English. Text: Miles Coverdale, after Martin Luther. The Concert Choir, Youngstown State University and St. John's Church Boy Choir, 1967

The blessed Son of God only in a crib full poor did lie;
With our poor flesh and our poor blood was clothed in everlasting good;
Kyrie eleison ("Lord Have Mercy").

The Lord Christ Jesu, God's Son dear, was a guest and a stranger here;
Us for to bring from misery, that we might live eternally;
Kyrie eleison.

All this did he for us freely, for to declare his great mercy;
All Christendom be merry therefore, and give him thanks forevermore;
Kyrie eleison.

* * *

"Ave Maria" by Anton Bruckner (1824-1896), Austrian. Text: traditional after Luke 1:28, and 42. The Montgomery Civic Chorale, 1974.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death. Amen.

* * *

"For He Shall Give His Angels Charge Over Thee" from *Elijah* by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847), German. Text: Psalm 91: 11, 12; Proverbs 3:23. Soloists of the High Point Chorale with orchestra.

For he shall give His angels charge over thee that they shall protect thee in all the ways thou goest, that their hands shall uphold and guide thee lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.

* * *

"Psalm XXVIII," Franz Schubert (1797-1828), Austrian. Text from *The Book of Common Prayer* (King James Version, page 476).

"Hallelujah" from *Messiah* by George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) German-English. Text: Revelation 19:6; 11:15; 19:16. The Montgomery Civic Chorale with orchestra, 1976

Hallelujah! For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.
The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.
And He shall reign for ever and ever.