



# **A More Perfect Service: A History of Music at the First Universalist Church of Peoria**

*Judy Rosella Edwards*

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The nearly two-decade period between the 1898 and 1917 marked a dramatic change that came about in the First Universalist Church of Peoria, Illinois (now the Universalist Unitarian Church of Peoria), as the result of a series of remarkable circumstances. That era is more commonly remembered for the likes of Clarence Darrow, Rev. B. G. Carpenter and social reform efforts afoot in Peoria and across the country. Those scenes were accompanied by a remarkable soundtrack. Music has long held an esteemed role in the Universalist Church of Peoria, but it came to fruition well after elaborate music programs were already a mainstay at other churches in the city. It was the result of a long and discouraging struggle followed by some remarkable fate, coupled with an inherent disadvantage within the Universalist tradition known as the “church season.” To understand the evolution of music in the Universalist church, requires a comprehensive awareness of music in Peoria churches. As early as the late 1890’s, churches of every denomination were hiring a more perfect worship experience by supplementing the humble efforts of their congregation with paid professional vocalists and musicians. The Universalists eventually followed suit. Here, that story is told by a contributor to the Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography, Judy Rosella Edwards. Included is a list of musical works the Universalists were treated to in the early 1900’s. They range from classical music to modern pieces punctuated by original works.

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