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AVRAHAM AVINU (2007)

Program notes:

As part of a residency with the local opera company, I spent four months in Omaha, NE in late 2006 and early 2007. While in Omaha I was hosted by the Gardels family, who provided me a home away from home and space in which to write. Near the end of my stay, the Gardels suggested the idea of commissioning a new work for their church, Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, to celebrate the installation of their new Dean of Urban Ministry, the Very Reverend Ernesto Medina. The subject of Abraham and his covenant with God was also suggested at this time, and it seemed quite appropriate, especially considering Trinity Cathedral's important "Tri-Faith" initiative. Abraham is simultaneously a unifying and divisive figure, but it is remarkable to what extent he is beloved in all three of the "great" monotheistic traditions. I therefore chose texts from a variety of sources: a Sephardic folk song in Ladino which addresses Abraham as the "light of Israel"; some verses from the beginning of Genesis XVII, when God appears to the 99-year-old Abraham and speaks of the covenant between them; and a poem by the Sufi poet Rumi declaring that "He that is praised is, in fact, only One." I use the Sephardic text "Avraham avinu" ("Abraham, our father") as a refrain in this work, appearing at the beginning, middle, and end. I have also asked for solo voices in the setting of Genesis; a solo soprano delivers sermon-like lines which introduce the word of God, sung here by a solo SATB quartet (doing Benjamin Britten one better on his beautiful setting of the voice of God in the second *Canticle*). It seemed to me that God's voice (despite his generally masculine depiction in mainstream religious commentary and art) would sound neither masculine nor feminine, and should necessarily encompass all available voices. *Avraham Avinu* was given its world premiere on September 12, 2007, by the Trinity Cathedral choir, with its leader John Bennett conducting.

Texts and Sources:

The texts for *Avraham Avinu* come from three sources. The first is a traditional Sephardic folk song called "Cuando El Rey Nimrod", from which I have taken only the chorus:

Avraham avinu, padre querido
Padre bendicho, luz de Israel.

Abraham our father, beloved father,
Blessed father, light of Israel.

The second source is the Torah/Old Testament, specifically the first verse of Genesis XVII. I have adapted the text from William Tyndale's 1530 translation, modernizing the orthography but otherwise preserving his uniquely beautiful phrasing.

The third text is from a poem that forms part of the *Masnavi* by the Sufi poet Rumi, whose ecumenical sentiments seemed appropriate for a piece on the patriarch who is beloved by all three of the "great" monotheistic traditions. The English text is adapted from F. Hadland Davis' 1912 translation.

Instrumentation: Solo Soprano, SATB Chorus (extensive divisi), and Organ

Duration: 6 minutes

Premiere: September 12, 2007, the Trinity Cathedral Choir of Omaha, NE, John Bennett, Director