



AMERICAN COMPOSERS FORUM

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Continental Harmony Premiere in West Harlem New Composition Celebrates the People of West Harlem

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St. PAUL, Minn., September 29, 2006—Composer Ishmael Wallace's new *Continental Harmony* cantata titled "The West Harlem Christ" will premiere October 22, 2006 at 1:30 p.m. at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Harlem. The cantata will also be performed October 25 at 8:00 pm at Broadway Presbyterian Church, and October 27 at 7:00 pm at St. Mary's Episcopal Church. All performances are free. Performers include the St. Mary's Gospel Choir, Howl Chorale, The Orfeo Duo, Daniel Neer, and Beth Anne Hatton. In addition to the new cantata, the concerts will include each choir performing several works from its own repertoire, songs by participants in a songwriting workshop for teenagers, and Jonathan David's song cycle based on poems by local poets. Wallace's cantata is a celebration of the community members in West Harlem, and is based on Wallace's interviews with homeless neighbors.

"This program offers communities — from rural towns to metropolitan areas — the unique opportunity to be a part of new musical works which celebrate their history and culture," says John Nuechterlein, President and C.E.O. of American Composers Forum. "These exceptional musical celebrations strengthen social bonds and renew the collective spirit."

Wallace began his *Continental Harmony* project by interviewing people at the St. Mary's soup kitchen and at Broadway Community Incorporated, a center for persons in crisis affiliated with Broadway Presbyterian. After collecting stories, he went to work writing a piece of music that weaves together the many cultures represented in this community. According to Wallace, "My goal was to make clearly heard the voices of people who are not usually listened to, presenting the words complete with stammering and hesitations and using the musical structure to help clarify the meaning of the text. In listening to these voices, I found that I was learning fundamental things about being human. I came to see the work as a kind of Passion, an account of the suffering and spiritual rebirth of our homeless neighbors, the West Harlem Christ, with gospel songs in the place of the traditional chorales. I have always longed to find a way to help advance the cause of peace and reconciliation through my music. This project has made that dream come true for me in a very tangible way."

This project is sponsored by St. Mary's Episcopal Church as part of the American Composers Forum's *Continental Harmony* project. St. Mary's has a long history of opening its doors to artists. This project is a response to a pressing need in the West Harlem neighborhood, a racially and socio-economically mixed community whose low-income residents are currently threatened by gentrification and reckless institutional development.

About composer Ishmael Wallace

Fascination with the relationship between words and harmonic progressions and a desire to advance dialogue between cultures are two of the driving forces behind Ishmael Wallace's music. His works include six operas to his own libretti, all of which have been performed, as well as chamber and orchestral works; they have won many national competitions.

As pianist of the Orfeo Duo, Ishmael performs extensively and has made numerous recordings. The Duo has received four consecutive residency grants from Chamber Music America for work in community. Ishmael is also co-founder of What a Neighborhood!, a series which celebrates the cultural and human richness of the area around Morningside Park in Upper Manhattan primarily through the music of local composers and spoken testimony from other community members.

Ishmael majored in both composition and piano at the Curtis Institute of Music and Mannes College of Music. His teachers have included Robert Cuckson, David Loeb, and Steven Stucky, composition, Richard Goode, piano, and Carl Schachter and Edward Aldwell, theory.

About Continental Harmony

Continental Harmony has been recognized as a model of local community artistic initiative. The initiative has been launched by the American Composers Forum in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts as a way of bringing composers and communities together each for the creation of original musical works reflecting the unique history, culture and spirit of community. Each host site identifies a theme, an occasion, and local performers for a musical work that will be meaningful to its citizens. With the assistance of American Composers Forum, the community group then selects the composer best able to write the music and carry out the residency.

During the inaugural round of the program in the year 2000, American Composers Forum discovered that *Continental Harmony* projects bring people together, heighten community feeling and sense of place, and encourage the formation of collaborations among groups. At the same time the artistic resources of the area are often strengthened and validated. As a result of this inaugural round, Twin Cities Public Television created an award-winning documentary and website. For more information, visit www.continentalharmony.org

Continental Harmony is a leadership initiative of the American Composers Forum and the National Endowment for the Arts, with additional funding provided by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, and support from the Target Foundation.

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