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Continental Harmony Premiere in Grinnell, Iowa, New Composition Explores the American Tall Grass Prairie

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St. PAUL, Minn., October 15, 2003—Composer Craig Thomas Naylor's original composition for the Grinnell College Singers, Grinnell High School Concert Choir and an all-city community choir entitled "Roots of Renewal" will be premiered Sunday, November 16 at 3 p.m. in the gymnasium of Grinnell High School. Tickets are not required; seating will be on a first come basis. The Falconer Gallery at Grinnell College commissioned the piece along with their community partners including The City of Grinnell, Grinnell High School Music Department, Grinnell College Music Department, Grinnell Renaissance, Grinnell Area Arts Council, and The Center for Prairie Studies as part of Continental Harmony, the national community-based composer residency program of American Composers Forum, St. Paul, Minn. The suite of six movements for choir, soloists and wind chamber ensemble accompaniment will enhance and be integrated with the Gallery's art installations, education events, and broad-based collaborations. The concert, conducted by Grinnell High School choral director Roger Henderson, will include other choral music suited to the theme of "Roots of Renewal."

The performance of Naylor's suite comes towards the end of "Roots of Renewal," a three-month celebration through visual and performing art, lectures, tours and film. The Falconer Gallery exhibition featuring 18 artists opened on September 6 and features art that explores new immigrants, new industries, new farming practices, and new attitudes towards the original tall grass prairie in the early 21st century. (The exhibition closes on December 14, 2003.) Rather than focusing on the archetypal Midwestern landscape, Roots of Renewal instead looks for complexity to undermine the shallow stereotypes that tend to define the Midwestern identity. Naylor's music continues this exploration.

Naylor, from Fredericksburg, Va., wrote the piece after making two visits to Grinnell where he met people from every part of the community – farmers, artists, business owners, retired elders, school children, college professors, and many others. He listened to their stories, their history, their hopes for and fears about life in the Midwest and then set about locating poetry that captured his sense of these concerns. A poetry contest, readings of the local retirement home's poetry club and sixty volumes of published Iowa poetry later, Naylor discovered six diverse texts that, when combined, fit the spirit of Roots of Renewal.

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The words for the six movements come from poems written (in order) by: Martha Purcell (Grinnell), James Hearst (deceased), Michael Carey (Farragut), Jane Wassom (Grinnell), Leedice Kissane (Grinnell), and another James Hearst poem. Three solos alternate with three choral movements, the last of which will be a massed choir including middle school, high school, and college students along with community members and a wind ensemble. The suite begins by acknowledging the past and the values that got us to this day. As it progresses, agriculture, the planting of seeds, and the passing of seasons serve as metaphors for facing the future, and contending with the joys and tribulations that come with our roots, and that are required for true renewal. Faith, hope and a clear-eyed realism are all strong in Naylor's contribution to the Roots of Renewal project.

"My visits in and composing for the town of Grinnell has been a true delight," says Naylor. "My parents were born on the prairie and, as a child, I returned there on visits many times. The honest, genuine and hard-working people I meet each time I return is why this region is called 'the heartland.' They care deeply about and toil without end to preserve their schools, their children, their communities and their churches, striving to maintain their way of life based on an honesty that has been lost in other parts of the country. Visiting Grinnell and writing this music has been an exploration in renewing my own roots and I have been enriched in countless ways through my cooperation with the citizen of Grinnell, its musicians and artists, and in the creation of my musical composition."

From its inception, Roots of Renewal was intended to include a rich array of programming over 3 months in order to expand the exhibition beyond the gallery walls. Lectures, artists' talk, live music, and related programs sponsored by community groups have all woven into a season's worth of exploration of just what renewal might mean in this part of the country. Lesley Wright, curator of the exhibition and director of Grinnell College's Faulconer Gallery notes that "the premiere of Naylor's composition, sung by as many voices as possible in our community, is the perfect example of how contemporary art can unify our efforts even when we are not sure what the future holds."

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 for the creation of original musical works reflecting the unique history, culture and spirit of each 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

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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.

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 Marshall Field's Project Imagine with support from the Target Foundation.

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