



COLLEGE OF VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS

Dewberry School of Music

DMA Composition Lecture Recital

David E. Chávez

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DavidEChavez.com/dma

David Chávez is a student of Dr. Jesse Guessford.

FEATURING

[Melissa Jean Chávez](#), soprano
[Elizabeth Mondragon](#), mezzo-soprano
Drew Frey, tenor

[Jeremy Koch](#), alto saxophone
[Craig Fraedrich](#), trumpet
Mike Dyson, trumpet
Phil Franke, euphonium
Sara Dyson, harp
Chris Franke, violin
Sue Franke, viola
[Sydney Bennett](#), cello
[David E. Chávez](#), conductor/keyboards/electronics

Video and Audio Production by David E. Chávez

SPECIAL THANKS

A huge thanks to the pastors, staff, and congregation of [Abiding Presence Lutheran Church, Burke, VA](#) for all their support in this process, and especially to the musicians of Abiding Presence who gave their time both for the original premiere of this cantata and for this recording.

Additional video footage, photography, and motion backgrounds courtesy DanStevens.com, Craig Jenkins (via flickr.com/photos/craigjenkins), Fly & Dive (via pond5.com/artist/fly_and_dive), and Unsplash.com

David E. Chávez, composer

PROGRAM

Great and Wondrous Mystery

David E. Chávez (b. 1981)

I. Aleppo

II. Jeremiah and Luke

III. Zechariah

IV. Mary

V. John

VI. Simeon

VII. Great and Wondrous Mystery

PROGRAM NOTES

Great and Wondrous Mystery is a meditation on the coming of the Christian Messiah, with texts quoted and paraphrased from prophetic Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The seven movements form a cantata for the liturgical season of Advent. These four weeks leading up to Christmas are a time of fasting, prayer, and self-examination during which the devout prepare themselves for the gravity of God made flesh among us. It is traditionally a shorter counterpart to the season of Lent, the 40 days of fasting and prayer leading up to Easter.

The title “Great and Wondrous Mystery” comes from an Armenian Apostolic Church hymn for the first day of Theophany (Greek for “a visible manifestation to humankind of God”) in January. (Many Eastern Orthodox Christians celebrate what we call Christmas on January 6 or 7 and the days following rather than on December 25.)

I was inspired by the text of this hymn, how it poetically embraced the unknowable mystery of the story of this Messiah in way that focused on awe and wonder, without trying to explain everything intellectually or relying on the sentimental tropes common to a lot of Western Christmas and Advent carols. We will hear a musical setting of portions of this hymn text in the seventh and final movement of the cantata.

According to an Armenian Orthodox writer describing this hymn:

Rather than being a state of ignorance and lack of knowledge, mystery is the beginning of worship. It's the place of awe where we realize our finitude within the shadow God's vast glory and divine infinitude. It's the place where we dare not attempt to *understand* or *grasp* with our feeble and flawed minds, so instead we bow before Him in worship. ...The *Mystery* is the Incarnation – Jesus Christ revealed among us, the Son of God, who became a human being in order to fill us with His divine blessings, with eternal life, so that we would become like Him. The mystery is the reality of God with, among, and in us.¹

The first time I heard this hymn text chanted was on an album titled [*Forty Martyrs: Armenian Chanting from Aleppo*](#). Release in 2015 commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, this recording is, according to historian and Fulbright scholar Dr. Elyse Semerdjian (who helped write the liner notes), “a precious archive of one of Syria’s ancient communities on what could be the eve of its extinction.” The war-torn reality in Aleppo today is indeed a wrenching contrast with the celestial spirituality of these chants. This pluralistic city, where people of different faith traditions and ethnicities historically lived and created side by side and where refugee camps transformed into vibrant neighborhoods, is today better known for multi-lateral war and government-on-civilian terror.

In pondering this dichotomy—transcendent ancient spirituality versus violent current events—I reflected on sacred texts which my church reads during the four-week Advent season as we prepare for the joyful 12-day Christmas season. The prophets and ordinary Jewish people behind these readings express plenty of otherworldly spirituality passed down through the ages, to be sure, but they also speak directly to the present needs and concerns of their immediate audiences, the people in front of them in their own times and places.

For example, Mary's song of praise traditionally known as the *Magnificat* (the Latin verb in the opening line, "My soul *magnifies* the Lord") may at first sound like a simple expression of humble gratitude. In this cantata, however, I chose to focus on the lines in which Mary boldly (some might say recklessly) proclaims the coming kingdom of God as a world-turning-

upside-down future which gives her great hope, but should cause the powers-that-be to tremble. Imagine being Mary—a young, poor, unwed, teenage mother-to-be from an oppressed people group living on occupied land—subversively prophesying what God is already doing and will do through her womb:

[God] has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

[God] has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

[God] has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.

(Luke 1:51a-53 CEB)

Had her words reached the ears of the reigning religious or political authorities, she might have been jailed or executed on the spot for anti-government zealotry or even blasphemy. She speaks in a way that is brave, countercultural, and ultimately accurate when it comes to the inevitable fall of empire.

In the desert a few decades later, John the Baptist has gained a following by, paradoxically, admonishing his audience to "Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives" (Luke 3:8) before the one who is even more powerful comes with a baptism of Holy Spirit and fire. The people were, not surprisingly, confused about what exactly they were supposed to *do* to prepare for this mystery Messiah. John is direct in his response: "Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same" ... "Collect no more than you are authorized to collect" ... "Don't cheat or harass anyone."

Many of these texts come from books which we refer to as “Gospels,” a term derived from an Old English translation of a Latin term, literally meaning “good news.”

I wrote this cantata out of a simple conviction: if the “good news” about a Messiah is not good news that makes a practical difference in the lives of people who live in places like Aleppo *today*, then it is not really good news at all.

Viewed through this lens, the bracing challenges and warnings proclaimed by these prophetic voices are still a bit scary, and also hopeful. These apocalyptic texts from the readings for Advent speak about Christ as a coming judge, but one who is a bringer of justice to those treated unjustly,

and should therefore be eagerly awaited, not avoided. These are prophecies to stir the hearts of those who are oppressed, alone, downtrodden, and separated from the ones they love. These promises should, like the old adage about a good sermon, comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

This cantata is dedicated to all those who have lost their lives or communities in Aleppo and other places like it, and to those who defiantly survive and make a life there to this day. I have been awed and humbled these past few years to see images of people *still* celebrating Christmas in Aleppo, sometimes [quite literally in the midst of the rubble](#). While I have in parts of this cantata borrowed brief musical phrases and drawn musical inspiration from the original hymn, I firmly believe that the chants from Forty Martyrs Church stand on their own; it is not my intention to rewrite their music. I hope only to honor and celebrate, and to inspire all of us to learn more and care more about geographically distant people with whom we nonetheless share a bond of human family.

TEXT AND TRANSLATIONS

(Sung texts are paraphrased from the following passages.)

I. Aleppo

Because of our God's deep compassion,
the dawn from heaven will break upon us,
to give light to those who are sitting in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide us on the path of peace. —LUKE 1:78-79 (CEB)

II. Jeremiah and Luke

[Jesus said,] "There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves. The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken, causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. Then they will see the Human One coming on a cloud with power and great splendor." —LUKE 21:25-27

The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land.

—JEREMIAH 33:14-15

[Jesus said,] "Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near." —LUKE 21:28

III. Zechariah

At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God.

...

"Bless the Lord God of Israel
because he has come to help and has delivered his people.

...

Because of our God's deep compassion,
the dawn from heaven will break upon us,
to give light to those who are sitting in darkness
and in the shadow of death,

to guide us on the path of peace.” —LUKE 1:64, 68, 78-79

IV. Mary

[Mary said,] “In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.
He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored
because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name.

He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next,
who honors him as God.

He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.” —LUKE 1:47-53

V. John

John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to
be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and
wanted God to forgive their sins. This is just as it was written in the scroll
of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

A voice crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.

Every valley will be filled,
and every mountain and hill will be leveled.

The crooked will be made straight
and the rough places made smooth.

All humanity will see God’s salvation.”

Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, “You
children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment
that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your
hearts and lives. And don’t even think about saying to yourselves,
Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s
children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees.
Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped
down and tossed into the fire.”

The crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

He answered, “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.”

Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

He replied, “Collect no more than you are authorized to collect.”

Soldiers asked, “What about us? What should we do?”

He answered, “Don’t cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay.”

The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. John replied to them all, “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I’m not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.” With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people. —LUKE 3:3-18

VI. Simeon

Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said, “Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation.

You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples.

It’s a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and a glory for your people Israel.”

His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too.” —LUKE 2:28-35

VII. Great and Wondrous Mystery

*Paraphrased by D. Chávez from the Canon of Theophany, The First Day,
[translated by V. Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan, St. Nersess Armenian
Seminary](#)²*

Praise, children of humanity, for he took body for us.
...glory to you.

The one who could not be bounded by heaven or earth was wrapped in swaddling clothes.

He lay in the holy cave.



Today heaven above delights in the dazzling good news...

O Lord, Sun of righteousness, glory to you.

...and all creatures have been clothed in salvation.

O Lord, Sun of righteousness, glory to you.

O Lord, Sun of righteousness, glory to you.

We also will sing to you, born of the virgin.

O Lord, Sun of righteousness, glory to you.

Adored by magi, you appeared to shepherds.

O Lord, Sun of righteousness, glory to you.

Unspeakable Word, unoriginate partner in divinity,

You existed before the ages,

(inseparable and ever-existing,)

And came for salvation!

We praise you, God of our fathers and mothers.

¹ “It All Begins With Mystery,” *The Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America* (blog), January 6, 2016, <http://diocesanministries.us/wpblog/2016/01/it-all-begins-with-mystery/>. Retrieved June 11, 2018.

² Canon of Theophany. Trans. V. Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan. *Armenian Hymnal*. St. Nersess Armenian Seminary. <https://www.stnersess.edu/canon-of-theophany-the-first-day.html>. Retrieved December 20, 2018.



An alleyway in Aleppo, Syria

Photo by Essa Mhmad (via unsplash.com/@essamhmad)

STUDENT BIOGRAPHY

David E. Chávez is a composer, collaborative pianist, music theory professor, church musician, music director, and podcaster. His compositions include the opera *Norton: A Civil War Story*, which premiered with Loudoun Lyric Opera in 2014, and works for classical and rock instrumental/vocal ensembles, solo songs, choral music, and film music. Dave regularly plays piano and electronics in an eclectic variety of collaborative groups and settings, including with [Opera on Tap DC Metro](#). Current positions include Music and Worship Minister at [Abiding Presence Lutheran Church](#) in Burke, VA, and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Music Theory at Shenandoah Conservatory. David holds two degrees in music composition from Penn State, and is a doctoral candidate at George Mason University. More at davidechavez.com.

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