

# ROBERT SIROTA

COMPOSER

## PROGRAM NOTES

### *TREE OF LIFE (2015)*

*An Anthem Commissioned by the Palladium Musicum in honor of Saint Paul's Within the Walls, Rome, Italy*

*Text by Victoria Sirota*

*Music by Robert Sirota*

*Based on the four Sir Edward Burne-Jones Mosaics: The Annunciation, Tree of Life, Christ Enthroned in the Heavenly Jerusalem, The Church Triumphant*

Program note by Victoria Sirota:

When you enter Saint Paul's Within the Walls in Rome, you are greeted on the apse wall behind the altar by a young Christ sitting on a throne and surrounded by angels so vividly depicted by Sir Edward Burne-Jones that they seem as if they are hovering in the air around you. Burne-Jones had never worked in the mosaic medium before, and surprisingly, he never visited Saint Paul's Within the Walls to see their execution. But he was profoundly inspired by the topic and gives us pictorial theology, the entire salvation history unfolding in these mosaics, the colors of which were chosen carefully by the artist and, because they are brilliant Venezia-Murano tiles, have not faded over time.

Bob and I sat in this American Episcopal Church in Rome on three consecutive particularly rainy and dark days in February 2015, struggling to see the upper two mosaics. Was Eve carrying a child with another at her knee in the second mosaic? If so, they were Cain and Abel. If not, she stood more metaphorically for all childbearing women (there is indeed a second child in her arms). The desert scene in which Mary encounters Gabriel was particularly surprising, not often a location for the Annunciation. And what was the crucified Christ doing hanging on the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden? Burne-Jones wrote to his friend about this mosaic, "I doubt if you will care for it--perhaps you will... It's a mystical thing--Christ hanging with outstretched arms but not crucified: the cross is turned into a big tree all over leaves, and the stems of the tree are gold...I am doing my best, but it isn't a picture and few will understand it." (Burne-Jones letter as quoted in Judith Rice Millon, *St. Paul's Within-the-Walls, Rome*, p. 60).

"It isn't a picture" and "It's a mystical thing." These quotes from the artist are what finally inspired me to describe what I saw in the mosaics as well as what I heard and felt in the space: the great Latin hymns and mass set by hundreds and thousands of composers being sung continuously by heavenly choruses transcending time and space. The text and the music of this anthem try to capture a piece of the ineffable, of that place between heaven and earth of which we only occasionally are given a brief glimpse.