Daniel Pesca

TERRA INCOGNITA

(2018–2019)
three songs for voice and piano
to texts by Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and D.H. Lawrence

Commissioned by the Huntsville Chamber Music Guild
in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the first manned lunar landing
Written for Alexandra Fees, in friendship

TERRA INCOGNITA is a song cycle that sets the words of three poets—poets who never met, who lived during different (although overlapping) years, and who lived in different places. But uniting all of these texts is the ageless, profoundly human obsession with the moon. None of them lived to see the first manned lunar landing—but, by bringing their texts together, I craft an arc which imagines three stages in the process of lunar exploration:

- 1. LONGING FOR THE MOON: Dickinson's "The Moon is distant from the Sea" visualizes the arching waves of the tides as the yearning of the earthly for the lunar, which is likened to the romantic other;

- 2. GETTING TO THE MOON: Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" juxtaposes the technical, scientific thinking that enabled the lunar mission—and which is epitomized by Huntsville's brilliant engineering community—with the aesthetic experience of wonder and mystery that we all experience while stargazing;

- 3. THE LUNAR SURFACE: Lawrence's "Terra Incognita" uses lunar imagery (and freewheeling, winding language) to paint a mysterious landscape. While Lawrence evokes unknown lands *within ourselves*, I also read the poem as a vivid projection of the strangeness of the surface of the moon.

The cycle launches from the earth (#1) through space (#2) to the moon (#3). The different styles of the poets color the journey: Dickinson bodily and poetic, Whitman conversational and narrative, Lawrence contemplative and mystical. My musical language across the cycle varies accordingly: from the bardic and lyrical Dickinson setting, evoking the history of art song, to the uncanny Lawrence setting, in which the sound of the piano is transformed beyond the ordinary.