

# *Parallels and Crossings III: Sacred and Earthly Love*

CONCERT NOTES BY ARTISTIC DIRECTOR NIKOLAI KACHANOV

The Biblical Song of Songs of Solomon's is one of the poetic gems imparted to us from the days of antiquity. Love, Wisdom, and God make up the essence of three books: the Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. These words are generally associated with the life stages of King Solomon—his youth, adulthood, and old age—and are considered philosophical accomplishments. It is the Song of Songs (Shir ha-Shirim), however, that has sparked the interest of thinkers and artists alike. It is impossible, within the confines of these notes, to do justice to the variety of interpretations of this text. It is equally unrealistic to try to illustrate the variety of musical interpretations of the Song of Songs in just one concert program.

While studying this theme, it occurred to me that the Song of Songs is like a mirror that reflects humanity's attempts to understand the ideas of Love. The transformation over thousands of years in the way we relate to this text can be likened to the shift in our perception of the naked human form in visual art. To my mind comes an association with an amusing episode which happened with the famous Russian artist Nikolai Roerich. In 1906 he was preparing for an exhibition on the theme of the naked human body at the St. Petersburg School of the Arts, where he worked as director. Prior to the opening, the exhibition was viewed by the mayor's wife, who found the nudity scandalous and had her husband order Roerich to take appropriate measures to stop the disgrace. Roerich remained calm, and, as one of his students later remembered, smiled mysteriously. He ordered the figures to be covered with cloth—the male forms from the waist to the knees, and the female forms from the shoulders to the knees. He then invited a photographer from the popular magazine *Ogonyok* to come and photograph the exhibit. The reaction was overwhelming. Crowds gathered before the opening, and once let in, they cheered and laughed at the naked forms covered, as if in modesty, with cloth. The exhibition was saved.

European history shows us that the text of the Song of Songs has always perplexed church authorities. Composers, however, continued to work with the text, trying to adhere to the understanding of their time. Each of them tried to interpret their idea of the earthly and spiritual love that reflected the understanding of the Song of Songs of their contemporaries.

In Russia the situation was a bit different, because until 1814 there was no Russian translation of the Old Testament. Only in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Bible Society began to publish it. However, the Bible Society was liquidated in 1824, and the

few books it managed to publish were destroyed. Nonetheless, the Song of Songs was available to those Russians who had access to Western editions of the Old Testament, and it served as an inspiration to poets like Derzhavin, Pushkin, Fet, Brusov and others. As for ordinary people, the Synod proclaimed that "not everyone is allowed to read certain parts of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, without supervision." Because the text of the Song of Songs troubled church leaders, they did not include it in their services. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the Russian musical repertoire contains very few choral compositions on the theme of the Song of Songs.

In the Judaic tradition, however, there are numerous beautiful and profound interpretations of the Song of Solomon. One of the interpretations is "The Mystery of the Kiss," Zohar II, 146a-146b[1] (~1300). *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth* [SoS 1:2]. "What did King Solomon mean by introducing words of love between the upper world and the lower world, and by beginning the praise of love, which he has introduced between them, with 'let him kiss me'? They have already given an explanation for this, and it is that inseparable love of spirit for spirit can be expressed only by a kiss, and a kiss is with the mouth, for that is the source and outlet of the spirit. And when they kiss one another, the spirits cling to each other, and they are one, and then love is one."

We will begin tonight's concert with the motet *Nigra sum, sed formosa* by Giovanni Palestrina from his *Canticum Canticorum* that included 29 motets on the texts of the Song of Songs. The atmosphere in which he composed this work is illustrated by his letter to Pope Gregory XIII:

*To Our Most Holy Lord Gregory XIII, Supreme Pontiff:*

*There are too many poems with no other subject matter than loves alien to the Christian profession and name. These poems, written by men truly carried away by fury, corrupters of youth, a great many musicians have chosen as the material for their skill and industry, and while they have been distinguished by the praise of their talent, they have equally given offense to good and serious men. I blush and grieve to admit that I was once one of their number. But now, when past things cannot be changed and things done cannot be undone, I have changed my purpose. Therefore I have both already labored on those poems which have been written of the praises of our Lord Jesus Christ and his Most Holy Mother the Virgin Mary, and at this time chosen those which contain the divine love of Christ and his spouse the soul, indeed the Canticles of Solomon. I have used a kind of music somewhat livelier than I have been accustomed to use in ecclesiastical melodies, for this I felt that the subject itself demanded. It has been my wish, indeed, to offer this work, such as it is, to Your Holiness, who I doubt not will certainly be satisfied by the intent and the endeavor, if less so by the thing itself. But if (may it so befall!) I shall give satisfaction with the thing itself, I shall be encouraged to produce others which I shall expect to please Your Holiness. May God, as long as may be, preserve for us Gregory, the most vigilant shepherd, with the greatest love for his flock, and heap all felicity upon him.*

*His humble servant  
Giovanni Aloysio Palestrina*

Even though Palestrina chose the genre of the motet for the Canticum, showing his affiliation with the church, there exists a tradition of performing the Canticum as a madrigal (the lyrical genre of the Renaissance). In essence, his cycle *Canticum Canticorum* is on the borderline between the composer's style of spiritual and secular music.

Heinrich Schütz is an outstanding representative of the early German baroque, who was influenced by the Italian Renaissance. In his *Dialogue* he combines women's and men's voices, creating a delicate, colorful, musical image of the "Daughter of Jerusalem," combined with the insistent intonations of her lover. In the finale, the male and female voices intertwine, forming a musical fabric. In comparison with Palestrina it becomes apparent that Schütz was more free when he transmitted the lyrical, romantic element of the Song of Songs.

The following several compositions belong to our contemporaries. They bring out an expressive array of emotions and images, each one showing his unique vision and musical interpretation of the essence of this ancient poem. The composer Lee R. Kesselman reflects: "I have always been fascinated by the Song of Songs of Solomon's. For a long time I couldn't understand the place of these sensual texts in the context of the Holy Scriptures. As time goes on, I find a greater logic to their inclusion in the Bible, as the connection between the physical and spiritual has greater resonance for me. In the overall context of world religion, there is no doubt that the marriage of physical and spiritual aspect of Love is universal."

I think that among other things, the Song will continue to attract composers and musicians because it belongs to King Solomon. This mysterious image of this wise ruler is wrapped in a multitude of legends and sayings. Nicholas Roerich, who over the course of his travels collected tales about King Solomon, wrote in his book, *Asia*: "On Mount Moria there is a treasure chest belonging to King Solomon. But the wise symbols of King Solomon aren't to be found only in the temples. According to the Bible, the engineer Hammon from Rhodesia discovered mines of King Solomon. Mathematicians are fascinated by the star of Solomon. 'This too shall pass' is a way King Solomon encouraged humanity in turmoil to go on with their lives. The Song of Solomon is eternal in its beauty."

In the second part of our program we will present to you the music of contemporary Siberian composers Yury Ashepkov and Yury Yukechev. In his work Ashepkov uses the text from Dhammapada. According to tradition, Dhammapada consisted of the sayings of the Buddha.

Ashepkov chose the text from the chapter "Twin Verses." The composition is written for a sitar with chorus, and consists of two parts and a coda for solo soprano. The

introduction, played on the sitar, symbolizes peace and harmony. Gradually, the human voice enters this world of inner harmony. The composer uses the chorus in an unusual way, as a counterpoint of repeating some haunting thoughts. Subtle and virtually indistinguishable at the start, they grow to encompass into more and more voices until they spill into a wave of rage: "He abused me, he beat me, he overpowered me, he took from me!!!" A person ceases to hear the voice of wisdom: "In those who bear these grudges hatred is not stilled." The second movement begins again with the sitar. This time around the rhythmically repeating intonations sound like attempts to convince, but again, the consciousness, distracted by offenses, doesn't hear the voice of wisdom. During the climax a voice comes from above: "Hatred is, indeed, never appeased by hatred in this world. It is appeased only by loving-kindness. This is an ancient law." At the conclusion, the sitar sounds again, returning peace and harmony.

Yury Yukechev composed his work to the text from the Books of Living Ethics, which is a compilation of Eastern wisdom. His music expresses the lofty and austere tone of a Master addressing his disciples. The cello monologue is a prelude to his message: Learn how to love.

Our program concludes with Yukechev's "O, Beauty!" written to the poetry of Omar Khayyam. The elements of the Eastern musical scale beautifully convey the style of Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*.

*Translated by Anna Astrakhan*