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# Four Compositions by Menachem Wiesenberg

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## **Four Composition by Menachem Wiesenberg**

Program Notes and Texts for a UMass Concert of 15 February 2005  
Featuring the Compositions of Guest Composer Menachem Wiesenberg  
by Emanuel Rubin

**EYN GEDI**, arranged from a melody by D. Aharoni. (poem: E. Peretz;)  
Sung by the *Mak'hela*, Pioneer Valley Jewish Chorus, Kayla Werlin, conductor

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Starting about 200 yards above the Dead Sea, four freshwater springs tumble precipitously down a cliffside to form the oasis of Eyn Gedi. The stunning contrast between the lush vegetation of the oasis and the sere desert countryside around it has sparked awe from the earliest times, as is attested by a Chalcolithic temple found above the spring and numerous later references in the Bible. In Genesis 14:7 it is called by an older name, "Hazazon-tamar" (Place of the date palms), and it is mentioned again in Joshua 15:61-62 and II Chronicles 20:2, among other verses. The most famous reference to Eyn Gedi, though, occurs in I Samuel 23:29, where it is named as the place that young David found refuge from the rage of King Saul. "And David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of En Gedi."

How, though, did it become the subject of a twentieth-century song? As early as 1926, with an eye to the creation of a state, the Jewish National Fund began to commission songs for a body of new national music, and by 1927 printed its first songbook. A letter sent to musicians and poets on 14 November of that same year stated, "Song is capable of disseminating Zionist culture better than a speech [or] a pamphlet."\* The legacy of such thinking has been that Jewish composers, both before and since the creation of the state, were encouraged to write music about the land. Eyn Gedi is one such a song, and while the text hardly seems like a travel agent's brochure at first, it turns into praise for Eyn Gedi as a lush desert oasis that stands as a allegorical symbol for the future of Israel. Wiesenberg has re-set Aharoni's lovely melody in this suave choral arrangement, demonstrating the ongoing commitment of Israeli composers to create music for a broad spectrum of listeners as well

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\*Letter of 14 November 1927, cited in Natan Shahar, "The Eretz Yisraeli Song and the Jewish National Fund," *Modern Jews and the Musical Agendas*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 79.

as challenging compositions for more experienced audiences.

**BY NIGHT ON MY BED** (from “Song of Songs” 3:1-4)

Marjorie Melnick, Mezzo-soprano solo

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The “Song of Songs,” that richly erotic poem from the Bible, has been a favorite source of texts for composers of both religious and secular music at least since the Renaissance. Its lyrical words of love have, on the one hand, been interpreted as an allegorical description of the relationship between the people and God, while on the other, they have been embraced just as eagerly as an earthy expression of human passion. There is a connection between the first two pieces on tonight’s program, because Eyn Gedi’s beauty is also praised in the Song of Songs: “My beloved to me is a spray of henna blooms from the vineyards of Eyn Gedi” (1:14). In 1997 Menachem Wiesenberg chose four particularly evocative verses from that expression of Oriental ardor. They recount a yearning so strong it drives the speaker into the streets in search of her beloved. Alone on stage, the singer becomes a monologist, narrating, almost as in a dream, her overwhelming passion.

**ENTRAPPED BIRD** (poem: Ya’ir Hurvitz, 1941 – 1988)

Marjorie Melnick, mezzo-soprano

Marylou Churchill, violin; Fred Cohen, Oboe; Nikki Stoia, piano

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This 1998 composition harks back to one of the popular forms of entertainment in the late Renaissance and Baroque: the secular cantata, a composition for one or two voices accompanied by small instrumental ensemble. Ya’ir Hurvitz, one of the renowned “Tel Aviv poets” of the 60’s, lived his entire brief life in that city, earning his living as a typesetter and proofreader. His poem, with its central image of the entrapped bird, unable to fly, is like a multifaceted crystal: what one sees changes, depending on how the light strikes it. Perhaps it is a song to the beloved, unfairly bound by the poet’s irrational striving, his “~~head sailing in the clouds,~~” as he mourns: “I look at you and see / Your wings bound to your body / Robbed of movement .” Or it might be an allegory for the circumstances of modern Israel: “A piece of ground trapped in an empty hand / Like a bird trapped in the wind’s hand,” cries the bird, as the poem nears its end. Or the bird might be the poet’s

creative spirit, seeking freedom but fearing death: “And your expectant eyes grow dull / Preferring visions of the dream. / In your voice I hear / A tone that seeks death.”

To complicate matters even more, the text is filled with almost unconscious allusions to biblical narrative and the synagogue liturgy. “You whom I sent to see if the water subsided,” certainly puts us in mind of the dove sent out by Noah, even using some of the same words; and the lines “Open the gate for me” and “Lift up your eyes to the heavens” are resonances from the 24<sup>th</sup> and 121<sup>st</sup> psalms, respectively. “Your feet are on the ground,” says the bird, “And your head sails in the clouds”—possibly a reference to the biblical description of young Joseph, the dreamer? Most touching, though, are the bird’s final words: “The earth will open to me like a gate . . . And afterwards, just the final closing (*ne’ila*.)” Those familiar with the liturgy of the Day of Atonement will immediately make a connection to the final prayer of that most solemn day of the year, when the gates of heaven are envisioned as closing and locking (*ne’ila*).

When all is said and done, though, the text must be viewed not just through our own eyes, but through those of the poet, who wrote this moving “love song/elegy” in his own final days, knowing that death was approaching. Wiesenberg captures the ambiguity of all these possible meanings in his evocative setting, using the instruments to encompass and set off the vocal narrative with interludes that establish the mood—or change it—as well as simply accompanying the voice. The song is presented in a succession of images, each of which is treated as a musical scene in this powerful contemporary cantata.

## **CONCERTINO FOR VIOLONCELLO AND STRING ORCHESTRA**

Astrid Schween, violoncello solo

UMass Opus One String Orchestra, Lanfranco Marcelleti, conductor,

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Like the previous composition, the *Concertino* also dates from 1998. It is a rhapsodic piece, demanding both virtuosity and sensitivity from the soloist. Ostensibly in a single movement, its alternations between pensive recitative, moody lyricism, and frenetic virtuosity actually convey the listener through several contrasting movements. It opens with an introspective recitative for the solo

cello, marked *Adagio molto espressivo*, which gradually becomes more impassioned until the string orchestra enters. The solo cello re-emerges from a brief interlude for the accompanying strings, first with a series of brilliant, nervous gestures answered by the orchestra, then finally with a more lyrical melody. A series of musical scenes follows, taking us through varying moods and tempos until we arrive at a more thoughtful closing utterance for the cello. The ending passes into the distance in a somber whisper, with a final, hushed marking of *niente*.

### **ABOUT THE COMPOSER**

Menachem Wiesenberg was awarded the 1998 Prime Minister's prize for composition, and the prize for outstanding achievement in Concert Music by the Israeli Society of Authors, Composers & Music Publishers' in 1992. He is visiting UMass as one leg of his 2005 American tour, and earlier in the academic year was a guest composer in London. Among his more recent compositions, the world premiere of his **Violin Concerto**, played by Hagai Shaham, took place January 2004, **Reflections** for Symphony Orchestra, commissioned by The Israel Philharmonic, in 2002, and the **Concerto Da Camera—La Folia**, commissioned by the Israel Camerata of Jerusalem, in 2001. That last piece, incidentally, was composed here in the US, while a fellow at the VCCA in Virginia. He has held other grants and commissions from the Schleswig-Holstein Festival, the Lille Festival, the Israel Council for Culture and Art, the Tel-Aviv Foundation for Culture and Art, and The America-Israel Cultural Foundation, to cite just a few. In this country, he has had works commissioned by the Oregon Bach Festival, the University of Wisconsin, and the Relache Ensemble of Philadelphia. His music has been performed by major orchestras, soloists, and chamber ensembles in Germany, Austria, France, Ireland, The Czech Republic, Croatia, The Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Cyprus, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Columbia, Brazil, Japan, and Taiwan.

Menachem Wiesenberg's background in jazz, his love for Yiddish and Israeli folk music, and his skill at merging Arab music with the techniques of the West, have given him a unique voice among contemporary Israeli composers. His CDs are distributed under the EMI and Koch

International labels, and his music has been broadcast in the United States, by Radio Cologne, Radio Bavaria, Radio Geneva, French International Radio, and the Israel Broadcasting Service. He has also appeared as a piano soloist and in chamber music concerts with internationally known artists like German violist Tabea Zimmerman, American clarinetist Charles Niedich, and Israelis such as singer Mira Zakai, violinist Hagai Shaham, and cellists Hillel Zori and Zvi Plesser.

## TEXTS OF THE VOCAL MUSIC

### 1. *Eyn Gedi* (poem: E. Peretz)

*Yam hamavet hakachol balat yanu'a,  
Umima'al anana k'tana tashut,  
Ets ha'eshel bidmama yazu'a,  
Vechol kav bachol yafe charut,  
Ha'adama tatshiv belahat shemesh,  
Ve'avak machanik ya'uf barum,  
Ach Eyn Gedi lo tisbol bakemesh,  
Ba yishlot gavan yarak vachum.*

*Eyn Gedi, Eyn Gedi -  
Ma haya ki tsamacht bachama?  
Eyn Gedi, Eyn Gedi -  
Ech plagim bach chotrim bashmama,  
Eyn Gedi, Eyn Gedi -  
Bach hayofi yofa bechol hod,  
Vehalev yeharher veyachamod.*

*Yam hamavet hakachol balat yanu'a,  
Vechol har po yitnase ge'e varam,  
Venachal arugot ze hayadu'a,  
Mahalacho yeshir el toch hayam.  
Ha'adama tatshiv belahat shemesh,  
Ach Eyn Gedi hi neve midbar,  
Yom chadash eino dome le'emesh,  
Ve'atid mazhir tsofeyn la hamachar.*

The blue Dead Sea moves languidly,  
While overhead a tiny cloud floats by,  
The tamarisk moves in silence,  
And every line is beautifully engraved in the sand.  
The earth is scorched yellow by the fierce sun,  
And stifling dust blows about,  
But Eyn Gedi will not wither,  
In it will reign hues of green and brown.

Eyn Gedi, Eyn Gedi -  
How is it that you flourish in the heat?  
Eyn Gedi, Eyn Gedi -  
How is it that streams find their way in the desert?  
Eyn Gedi, Eyn Gedi -  
In you, beauty will be seen with all its glory,  
And the heart will reflect and desire.

The blue Dead Sea moves languidly,  
Every mountain here stands high and proud,  
The famous stream of Arugot,  
Flows straight into the sea.  
The earth is scorched yellow by the fierce sun,  
But Eyn Gedi is a desert oasis.  
A new day is not like yesterday,  
And the future holds in it a glorious tomorrow.

--tr. ER

### 2. *AL MISHKAVI BALAYLOT* ("By Night On My Bed") (Song of Songs 3:1-4)

*Al mishkavi baleylot bikashti et sh'ahava  
nafshi;  
Bikashtiv v'lo metzativ.  
Akumah na ve'asovevah va'ir  
Bashvakim uvar'chovot  
Avaksha et sh'ahavah nafshi  
Bikashtiv v'lo metzativ.  
Metza`uni hashomerim hasovevim ba`ir  
et sh'ahavah nafshi re`item:*

*Kimat she'avarti mehem ad shematsati  
et sh'ahavah nafshi  
Achaztiv velo arpenu  
Ad shehavetiv el bet imi  
Ve`el cheder horati.*

By night on my bed I sought him who my soul  
loves;  
I sought him, but I found him not.  
I will rise now, and go about the city  
In the streets, and in the broad ways  
I will seek him whom my soul loves.  
I sought him, but I found him not.  
The watchmen that go about the city found me:  
To whom I said, "Have you seen him whom my  
soul loves?"  
Scarce had I passed from them when I found  
him whom my soul loves.  
I held him and would not let him go,  
Until I brought him into my mother's house,  
And into the chamber of her who conceived me.

### 3. *Tsipor Klu'ah* (“**Entrapped Bird**”<sup>++</sup>) Poem: Ya'ir Hurvitz (1941 – 1988)

*Ruchot menashvot min ha-chalon ha-mirpeset;  
Kol pirsa efsharit yafa la-ru'ach,  
Ach dome ki avir ha-cheder dalil.  
Kashe lehamri lehaqbi'ah,  
Bizrima chasrat pniyot.  
Ani mabit bach v'ro'eh,  
Et knafayich asurot el gufech,  
Merushash mit'nu'a,  
V'eynaich ha-tzofiyot dome ki kahu,  
Ma'adifot et marot ha-chalom.  
Ani shome'a be-kolech  
Tzlil shoche mavet*

*At she-shalacht lirot ha-kalu ha-mayim,  
Shamayich nemuchim va-chalomech parus.  
Mo'eset ba-y'kitsa odech.  
Shara shir charashi,  
Ba-chalomech chalo be-mar'e chalom ra'it,  
Ki-re'i nichpal bir'i,  
U-va-chalomech ach pisat karka,  
Ke-tsipor k'lu'a b'chaf ru'ach,  
Ach pisat karka k'lu'a beyad reyka.*

*P'tach li sha'ar, ata omer,  
V'nose eynayim la-mromim.  
Raglecha al ha-karka,  
Veroshcha shat ba-'ananim.  
Et chayai avale bashamayim,  
Kach amra ha-tzipor,  
V'al ha-aretz eda et moti.  
Ha-adamah tipatach li ke-sha'ar,  
Hosifa ha-tzipor,  
V-'achareha rak ne'ila.*

Winds blow from the balcony window;  
The wind takes advantage of every opening,  
It seems that the air of the room is thin.  
It's hard to soar aloft,  
In a current without turns.  
I look at you and see,  
Your wings bound to your body;  
Robbed of movement,  
And your expectant eyes grow dull,  
Preferring visions of the dream.  
I hear in your voice,  
A tone that seeks death.

You whom I sent to see if the waters subsided,  
Your skies are low and your dream is spread.  
You loathe awakening.  
Singing a quiet song,  
In your dream you see a dream of dreams,  
Like a mirror reflected in a mirror,  
And in the dream, just a piece of ground,  
Like a bird trapped in the wind's hand,  
But a piece of ground trapped in an empty hand.

Open the gate for me, you say,  
And you lift up your eyes to the heavens.  
Your feet are on the ground,  
And your head sails in the clouds.  
My life I will spend in the heavens,  
Said the bird,  
And on the earth I will know my death.  
The earth will open to me like a gate,  
Added the bird,  
And afterward, just a final closing.