Four Compositions by Menachem Wiesenber

Emanuel Rubin

University of Massachusetts - Amherst
EYN GEDI, arranged from a melody by D. Aharoni. (poem: E. Peretz;)

Sung by the Mak’hela, Pioneer Valley Jewish Chorus, Kayla Werlin, conductor

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 an 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...
as challenging compositions for more experienced audiences.

**BY NIGHT ON MY BED** (from “Song of Songs” 3:1-4)
Marjorie Melnick, Mezzo-soprano solo

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 monologuist, 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

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 the 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 24th and 121st 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’ilah).” 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’ilah).

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 Marcelli, conductor,

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

   *Yam hamavet hakachol balat yanu’a,*
   While the blue Dead Sea moves languidly,
   *Umima’al anana k’hana tashut,*
   While overhead a tiny cloud floats by,
   *Ets ha’eshel bidmama yazu’a,*
   The tamarisk moves in silence,
   *Vechol kav bachol yafe charut,*
   And every line is beautifully engraved in the sand.
   *Ha’adama tatshiv belahat shemesh,*
   The earth is scorched yellow by the fierce sun,
   *Ve’avak machanik ya’uf barum,*
   And stifling dust blows about,
   *Ach Eyn Gedi lo tisbol bakemesh,*
   But Eyn Gedi will not wither,
   *Ba yishlot gavan yarok vachum.*
   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,
   Eyn Gedi, Eyn Gedi -
   And the heart will reflect and desire.

   *Yam hamavet hakachol balat yanu’a,*
   The blue Dead Sea moves languidly,
   *Vechol har po yitnase ge’e varam,*
   Every mountain here stands high and proud,
   *Venachal arugot ze hayadu’a,*
   The famous stream of Arugot,
   *Mahalacho yeshir el toch hayam.*
   Flows straight into the sea.
   *Ha’adama tatshiv belahat shemesh,*
   The earth is scorched yellow by the fierce sun,
   *Ach Eyn Gedi hi neve midbar,*
   But Eyn Gedi is a desert oasis.
   *Yom chadash eino dome le’emesh,*
   A new day is not like yesterday,
   *Ve’el cheder horatti.*
   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;*
   By night on my bed I sought him who my soul loves;
   *Bikashtiv v’lo metzativ.*
   I sought him, but I found him not.
   *Akumah na ve’asovevah va’ir*
   I will rise now, and go about the city
   *Bashvakim uvar’chovot*
   In the streets, and in the broad ways
   *Avaksha et sh’ahavah nafshi*
   I will seek him whom my soul loves.
   *Bikashtiv v’lo metzativ.*
   I sought him, but I found him not.
   *Metza’uni hashomerim hasovevim ba’ir*
   The watchmen that go about the city found me:
   *et sh’ahavah nafshi re’item:*
   To whom I said, “Have you seen him whom my soul loves?”
   *Kimat she’avarti mehem ad shematsati*
   Scarcely had I passed from them when I found
   *et sh’ahavah nafshi*
   him whom my soul loves.
   *Achaztiv velo arpenu*
   I held him and would not let him go,
   *Ad shehavetiv el bet imi*
   Until I brought him into my mother’s house,
   *Ve’el cheder horatti.*
   And into the chamber of her who conceived me.


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

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**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.**  

**At she-shalachti 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.**

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**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.**  

**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 tipatch li ke-sha’ar,**  
**Hosifa ha-tzipor,**  
**V-achareha rak ne’ila.**

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**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.**

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--tr. ER