

# Jorge Liderman & Chana Bloch's

## Song of Songs

Saturday, March 16, 2002, 8 pm

Hertz Hall

San Francisco Contemporary Music Players

Tod Brody, flute/piccolo

William Wohlmacher and Peter Josheff, clarinet

Blair Tindall, oboe

David Bithell, trumpet

Zachary Limacher and Keith Bucher, horn

Carla Kihlstedt, violin

Kurt Rohde and Madeline Prager, viola

Richard Worn, contrabass

Timothy Dent and Russell Greenberg, percussion

Karen Rosenak and Jacqueline Chew, piano

Chamber Chorus of the University of California at Berkeley

Marika Kuzma, director

Jennifer Alexander

Hoi Yan Fu

Marija Lazarevic

Aletha Schelby

Jessica Barnes

Nancy Hall

Hestia Lucchese

Christina Schiffner

Cecilia Cham

Anne Hege

Jamie Magno-Kuske

Lisa Spivak

Janice Chung

Yuko Hori

Carol Paxson

Celeste Winant

AnnMarie Darrow

Kate Howell

Sabrina Santiago

Karin Wollschläger

Sarah Finley

Elisa Kim

Lauren Schekman

Vocal Soloists

The Shulamite Elissa Johnston, soprano

The Lover Charley Blandy, tenor

Daughters of Jerusalem Catherine Webster, Sara Colburn, and Amelia

Triest

David Milnes, guest conductor

Jean-Louis LeRoux, music director

This evening's performance of Song of Songs is sponsored, in part, by Stephanie and Donald Friedman.

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and support from the UC Berkeley Consortium for the Arts.

### The Text

The Song of Songs—surely one of the most remarkable books of the Hebrew Bible—is a poem about the sexual awakening of a young woman and her lover. It takes the form of a dialogue between the two, or between the young woman, who is called the Shulamite, and the Daughters of Jerusalem. The lovers are quite young, perhaps the age of Romeo and Juliet, and the freshness of their voices suggests that they are discovering love for the first time.

In the Bible, sexuality is typically associated with the sober business of procreation. Not so in the Song, which recommends eros for its own sweet sake. “How did this book ever get into the Bible?” readers frequently ask—a question that has occasioned much conjecture. The prominent role given to the Shulamite is also surprising, since the Bible is for the most part the domain of men. The young woman has the best lines in the Song, including the first words (“Kiss me!”) and the last. She says with some pride that she “awakened” her lover, and her invitations to love are more outspoken than his. She is the one who teaches that love must not be roused carelessly:

Daughters of Jerusalem, swear to me  
by the gazelles, by the deer of the field,  
that you will never awaken love  
until it is ripe. (2:7)

and it is she who speaks the great truths about love:

Love is as fierce as death,  
its jealousy bitter as the grave.  
Even its sparks are a raging fire,  
a devouring flame. (8:6)

The Song of Songs calls out naturally for music. The word *shir* in its Hebrew title, *Shir ha-Shirim*, means both “song” and “poem.” Like the word “lyric,” it points to the origins of poetry in music. *Shir ha-Shirim* is a superlative term, like “the Holy of Holies,” meaning “the best of songs, the most songful of songs.” There is music to be heard in the lovers’ garden of delight, as seductive as the fragrance of henna and spikenard, frankincense, myrrh, and aloes. The young man, urging the Shulamite to come out and enjoy the wonders of spring, invites her to a concert of songbirds:

Now is the time of the nightingale.  
In every meadow you hear  
the song of the turtledove. (2:12)

And the lovers themselves are among the makers of music. The Shulamite listens for “the voice of my beloved” (2:8) as he listens for hers. “Let me hear your voice, your delicious song” (2:14), he calls to her, and again at the end of the poem: “O woman in the garden, all our friends listen for your voice. Let me hear it now” (8:13).

The Song of Songs was associated with music from the beginning. Scholars believe that individual lyrics may have been performed at banquets and festivals and weddings for hundreds of years before the Song came to be written down in its present form, most likely in the third century BCE. Singing to the accompaniment of flute, timbrel, or lyre was as much a part of the good life in ancient Israel as drinking wine or anointing oneself with fragrant oils. What kind of music was sung on festive occasions? Perhaps something like the following, which has been called a drinking song:

Feast, friends, and drink  
till you are drunk with love! (5:1)

The Song was known and sung among the people, who continued to understand it as an erotic love poem even when the rabbis began to interpret it allegorically as a dialogue between God and the people of Israel. Rabbi Akiva, who revered the Song as the “Holies of Holies,” felt obliged to issue a stern warning: “Whoever warbles the Song of Songs at banqueting houses, treating it like an ordinary song, has no portion in the World to Come.” His prohibition, of course,

made it perfectly clear just what people were doing, and where. Later, the Church Fathers interpreted the Song as a dialogue between Christ and the Church, or between Christ and the soul of the believer.

For 2,000 years, a variety of allegorical interpretations held sway, most of them guaranteed antidotes to eros—the Shulamite’s breasts, for example, are taken to represent Moses and Aaron!—though the mystical commentaries, Jewish and Christian, remained faithful to the ardor of the literal meaning. The Song became part of the liturgy of the synagogue, chanted on the Sabbath of Passover week, with different cantillations in the Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions. It held an honored place in the church liturgy as well, and in the Middle Ages was particularly associated with the worship of the Virgin Mary.

Many notable composers, including John Dunstable, Josquin des Pres, Giovanni da Palestrina, Henry Purcell, William Billings, and Igor Stravinsky, have made settings of lyrics from the Song. In our own day, the Song inspired some well-known Israeli folk songs and dances. Tonight we hear in Jorge Liderman’s setting a contemporary response to this ancient poem—one that celebrates fittingly the power and the joy of human love.

— Chana Bloch

### The Music

When I first read the lyrical new translation of the Song of Songs by Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch, I was immediately attracted to the idea of setting it to music. My interest in the Song goes back to 1985, when I composed *Shir Ha-Shirim*, a work for soprano and chamber ensemble based on excerpts from the Hebrew text, and I welcomed the opportunity to explore the text more fully in its English version. The passionate intensity of the Blochs’ translation, its richly sonorous language and strong supple rhythms, clearly invited a musical setting.

As I talked about the text with Chana,

I was struck once again by the joy, warmth, and color of the Song—the passion of young love, the exhilaration of a first sexual encounter, the blossoms, spices, and bird songs of springtime. These impressions translated themselves almost immediately into sound, suggesting three instrumental ensembles: 1) two pianos and two marimbas—percussive, pulsating; 2) two clarinets, two violas, and two French horns, with their lush tone; 3) flute, oboe, trumpet, violin, and double bass, with their mixed timbres. These three ensembles accompany the Shulamite (soprano) and her lover (tenor). They also interact with the Daughters of Jerusalem, which includes a female chorus and three soloists (soprano, mezzo-soprano, and alto) who are seated among the clarinets, violas, and horns.

I carried this orchestral sound in my ears for a while before I began to consider how it might evolve as a musical structure. How should the various elements interact with one another? Were there any architectural features of the text that would suggest corresponding forms in the music? I spent a great deal of time with the text, talking to Chana about my ideas and impressions, and benefiting from her intimate knowledge of the Song. Among other things, we discussed the cyclical structure of the poem, marked by refrains and repetitions, and by the recurrence of lovers’ meetings and partings, songs of praise, moments of longing, and celebration. With this in mind, I developed a formal model that would allow me to give shape and direction to my musical thoughts.

From the very start, I knew I wanted to create a large-scale work, one that would include almost the entire text of the translation, somewhat modified and reconfigured to serve the needs of the music. The result was an hour-long cantata, divided into three movements. Although my setting of the Blochs’ translation is not a staged work, I conceived my Song of Songs as a dramatic representation of the text. Each of the scenes in the three movements is distinct in its dramatic and musical quality.

### Movement I

Introduction – “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s”

Scene 1 – “Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses”

Scene 2 – “All night, my love”

Scene 3 – “I am in the fever of love”

Scene 4 – “Have you seen the one I love?”

### Movement II

Scene 1 – “You ravished my heart”

Scene 2 – “My heart stayed awake”

Scene 3 – “This is my beloved”

Scene 4 – “Feast, friends, and drink”

### Movement III

Scene 1 – “O Shulamite, dance again”

Scene 2 – “Come, my beloved”

Scene 3 – “Bind me as a seal upon your heart”

Movements I and III present the passionate sexual encounter of the Shulamite and her lover. Movement I reveals at once her boldness and openness; with her very first words, she invites her lover: “Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses!” (Scene 1). This is followed in Scene 2 by their encounter, “All night between my breasts, my love is a cluster of myrrh.” In the third scene, the Shulamite, “in the fever of love,” sings: “Now he has brought me to the house of wine, and his flag over me is love.” In Scene 4, she searches for him and finds him; with the wisdom of her experience, she appeals to the Daughters of Jerusalem: “Never awaken love until it is ripe.”

In Movement III, he praises her body, from her sandalled feet to the crown of her head, as she dances (Scene 1). The musical excitement generated by his praise elicits her invitation to “go out into the fields and lie all night among the flowering henna.” There, she promises, she will give him her love (Scene 2). In the final scene, she declares:

There, beneath the apricot tree,  
your mother conceived you,  
there you were born.  
In that very place, I awakened you.

She urges him with great solemnity: “Bind me as a seal upon your heart.” The consummation of love in both movements is followed by a parting that is only temporary, a prelude to further encounters:

Before day breathes,  
before the shadows of night are gone,  
run away, my love!

Movement II was conceived as a contrast to I and III. Here, at the center of the piece, each of the lovers pays tribute to the other. The young man exclaims, “How beautiful you are, my love, my friend!” And the young woman in turn praises him:

My beloved is milk and wine,  
he towers  
above ten thousand.

Their mutual praise culminates in a festive conclusion, which brings in the Daughters of Jerusalem, supported by the full orchestra:

Feast, friends, and drink  
till you are drunk with love!

The praise and celebration in the second movement, framed by the lovers’ encounters and partings in the first and third, forms an A–B–A design, which is reflected in the instrumentation and formal articulation of the music. While in Movements I and III the orchestra is divided into the three ensembles outlined above, in Movement II, the instruments are grouped into winds, strings, and percussion. Finally, the musical materials of Movements I and III resemble each other, reflecting the cyclical nature of the text, while Movement II incorporates some of the Ashkenazi tropes that are traditionally used for the liturgical cantillation of the text.

The joyous and festive spirit of love in the Song is what first attracted me to this project. My hope is that the music—bright, passionate, rhythmic, pulsating—honors the spirit of this ancient text in a fitting contemporary idiom.

Song of Songs was written for the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players and the UC Berkeley Chamber Chorus, and its composition was made possible by a UC President’s Research Fellowship in the Humanities and a grant from the UC Berkeley Consortium for the Arts. Song of Songs is dedicated to my love, Mimi Wolff.

—Jorge Liderman

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Jorge Liderman, born in Buenos Aires, began his musical studies at the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem, under Mark Kopitman. In 1988, he received his doctorate in composition from the University of Chicago, where he worked with Ralph Shapey and Shulamit Ran. A year later, Liderman joined the composition faculty at the University of California, Berkeley.

His works have been commissioned and performed by the London Sinfonietta, the American Composers Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Tanglewood Orchestra, Radio France, the Netherlands Wind Ensemble, the Nieuw Ensemble, the Arditti String Quartet, Cuarteto Latinoamericano, Boston Musica Viva, Milan Divertimento Ensemble, Chicago Pro Musica, and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, as well as by individual artists including Oliver Knussen, Diego Masson, Esa Pekka Salonen, David Tanenbaum, and Gloria Cheng. Liderman's music has been featured at Darmstadt, Nuova Consonanza, Stuttgart's Neue Musik, Semaines Musicales Internationales d'Orleans, Mexico's International Forum, London's Viva, Osaka's Expo '90, the International Rostrum of Composers (Paris), and Holland's Proms, among others. His music has also been recorded by CRI and CAMU.

Liderman's opera *Antigona Furiosa*, commissioned by Hans Werner Henze and the City of Munich, won the BMW International Music Theater Prize, in conjunction with the 1992 Third Munich Biennale.

At present, Liderman is working on a piano concerto for Italian pianist Maria Grazia Bellocchio and the Divertimento Ensemble of Milan, as well as a new piano quintet for Cuarteto Latinoamericano.

Chana Bloch collaborated with Ariel Bloch on the translation of the *Song of Songs* (Random House, 1995; University of California Press, 1998) which provided the text for Jorge Liderman's cantata.

Bloch is the author of three collections of poetry, *The Secrets of the Tribe*, *The Past Keeps Changing*, and *Mrs. Dumpty*, as well as a critical study of George Herbert. She is co-translator of *A Dress of Fire and The Window* by Dahlia Ravikovitch, and *The Selected Poetry and Open Closed Open* by Yehuda Amichai. *Chana's Story*, a song cycle by David Del Tredici based on her poems, was performed by the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players in 1998.

Bloch's awards include the Felix Pollak Prize, the Commonwealth Club Poetry Medal, a PEN Translation Award, two NEA Fellowships, and an NEH Fellowship. Her work has appeared in *Best American Poems*, *Pushcart Prize Anthology*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, and other national journals. Bloch is a professor of English and creative writing at Mills College.

David Milnes (conductor) presently serves as music director of the UC Berkeley Symphony Orchestra and the Berkeley Contemporary Chamber Players, and is a faculty member at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Following early musical studies on the clarinet, piano, organ, cello, and voice, he earned degrees from SUNY Stony Brook and Yale University. His conducting teachers have included Leonard Bernstein, Erich Leinsdorf, Max Rudolf, Herbert Blomstedt, Otto-Werner Mueller, and David Lawton.

After winning the prestigious Exxon Conductor position with the San Francisco Symphony in 1984, Milnes was hailed as "one of the major new conducting talents of our day" (Byron Belt). In San Francisco, his award-winning educational programs resulted in a nationally televised broadcast of a *Concerts for Kids* documentary; he also conducted subscription, contemporary, and pops concerts. He served also as music director of the acclaimed San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra, which he led on an highly successful international tour.

David Milnes is a frequent guest conductor in Russia and the Baltics. He has appeared with the Novosibirsk Philharmonic and served as a principal guest conductor of the Latvian National Symphony. Other recent collaborations have included performances with Frederica von Stade, Dawn Upshaw, Bill T. Jones, Paul Hillier, James Newton, and David Starobin. A dedicated proponent of new music, Milnes received a 1994 Grammy nomination for his recording of John Anthony Lennon's *Zingari*, and he has recently recorded an album of music by James Newton with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players.

As music director of the Riga Independent Opera Company as well as the opera and orchestral programs at SUNY Purchase and Southern Methodist University, Milnes' varied operatic repertoire has included productions of *Die*

Fledermaus, Eugene Onegin, Die Zauberflöte, Le Nozze di Figaro, La Bohème, Gianni Schicchi, and The Threepenny Opera, among others. His Sondheim revue program aired nationally on A&E in 1995.

David Milnes has recently conducted the Oregon, Columbus, Anchorage and Cheyenne symphony orchestras, and has performed at the festivals of Santa Fe, Tanglewood, Aspen, Monadnock, and Killington. He has guest conducted and lectured at the Juilliard, Curtis, and Mannes schools as well as at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Milnes has also had a lifelong interest in jazz, which has led to appearances with Gene Krupa, Chuck Mangione, and Billy Taylor.

The San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, now in its 31st year, is a leader among ensembles in the United States dedicated to contemporary chamber music. A seven-time winner of the prestigious national ASCAP/ Chamber Music America Award for adventurous programming of contemporary music, SFCMP has performed over 940 new works, including 105 world premieres, and has brought 61 new pieces into the repertoire through its active commissioning efforts. The instrumentalists who make up the Players are recognized virtuosos in new music performance. Each season, the ensemble performs a six-concert series at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. SFCMP has also toured widely throughout California, with performances on such concert series as San Francisco Performances, the Stern Grove Festival, the Other Minds Festival, Los Angeles' Monday Evening Concerts, the Ojai Festival, and the Festival of New American Music in Sacramento. SFCMP made its European debut at the Cheltenham Festival of Music in 1986 and its East Coast debut at the Library of Congress in 2001. The ensemble has recorded seven albums of its own and contributed recordings to eight others. Its innovative education programs for students at San Francisco's School of the Arts and Lowell High School include performance/presentations and master classes.

The UC Berkeley Chamber Chorus is an ensemble selected from among undergraduate and graduate students in the Berkeley campus community. Sponsored by the Department of Music, the ensemble has earned a fine reputation in the Bay Area, particularly for its performances of contemporary music, early music, and Slavic music. The Chorus has premiered works by such composers as Morton Feldman, Lou Harrison, and John Thow. Performances of early music have included Dufay's *Missa Ave regina celorum* and regular appearances with Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra. The Chorus' recordings include the Grammy-nominated Handel *Susannah*; Elinor Armer and Ursula LeGuin's *Eating with the Hoi*; and *Icons of Slavic Music*. The Chorus has performed for live broadcast on Austrian radio from St. Stephens Cathedral in Vienna, at the Kiev Conservatory, and in concert tours of the East Coast. Later this spring, the Chorus will perform a concert of orthodox music from Byzantine chant for men's chorus to Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* and join in a concert featuring the Hindemith Requiem.

Marika Kuzma (chorus director) is known as both a choral and orchestral conductor in the Bay Area. As the conductor of both the University Chorus and Chamber Chorus, she has directed music spanning from Machaut to Verdi to Steve Reich. Her choirs have been invited to collaborate with the Midsummer Mozart Festival, the Oakland East Bay Symphony, the Berkeley Symphony, a Grace Cathedral Chant-Along, as well as with Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and the Mark Morris Dance Group. While earning her doctorate at Indiana University, Kuzma assistant directed its Pro Arte Singers and Contemporary Vocal Ensemble. As an orchestral conductor, she has made guest appearances with the Aspen Sinfonia, Handel Society of Dartmouth College, the National Orchestra of Ukraine, Berkeley Symphony, the Bay Area Women's Philharmonic, Earplay, and Composers Inc. Kuzma has conducted the American premieres of instrumental works by Karchin, Rockmaker, Rzewski, and Takemitsu.

Elissa Johnston (soprano) has appeared throughout the United States and Great Britain in both operatic and concert repertory. Her orchestral engagements include season-opening performances of Nielsen's *Symphony No. 3* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Esa-Pekka Salonen, as well as concerts with the Atlanta Symphony under Yoel Levi, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. She has performed numerous times with the Los Angeles Philharmonic's New Music Group, most recently singing Jonathan Harvey's *Song Offerings* with conductor Steven Stucky. Johnston also appeared with the group under composer/conductor Tan Dun, and at the Ojai Festival under conductors Daniel Harding and David Zinman. She made her Lincoln Center debut in 1999 singing Brahms' *Liebesslieder Waltzes* with the New York City Ballet, and returned to Lincoln Center in May of last year, premiering *Morgen!*, a set of 10 orchestral songs by Richard Strauss choreographed by Peter Martins. Johnston has appeared in both the Stravinsky Festival at Lincoln Center, performing Stravinsky's *The Owl* and *The Pussycat*, and in the New York Philharmonic's Copland Festival, singing Copland's *As It Fell Upon a Day*. Her recital appearances include programs at the Aldeburgh Festival and at the Aspen Festival's Winter Music Series with composer Ricky Ian

Gordon. Also in Aspen, she sang the role of Pat Nixon in the world premiere of John Adams' concert suite from Nixon in China entitled *The Nixon Tapes*, with the composer conducting.

Johnston's recent operatic engagements include Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte* at the Snape Proms in England, the role of Female Chorus in Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* at the Aldeburgh October Britten Festival, and Marzelline in concert performances of Beethoven's *Fidelio* at both the Aspen Festival and with the Wheeling Symphony. With Los Angeles Opera, she has recently appeared in *Il Trovatore*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria*. Johnston has also performed the role of Brigitta in concert performances of Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, led by Valery Gergiev.

Charley Blandy (tenor) recently sang the title role in Britten's *St. Nicolas* under conductor Raymond Leppard. He has also sung works of Bach under conductors Stanley Ritchie, Vance George, and Jan Harrington, and with the Chicago Camerata. Blandy received critical acclaim for his performances of the role of Ferrando in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, and as tenor soloist in Handel's *Messiah*. He recently appeared in four concerts in Indiana University's Festival of Song honoring Benjamin Britten. At Indiana University, he studied voice with Alan Bennett and song repertoire with Leonard Hokanson. He graduated from Oberlin College with a bachelor's degree in religion.

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