

Song of the Shulamite

Song of the Shulamite is a 27-minute work about the passionate courtship between a beautiful, young field worker, the Shulamite, and her true love. It is the love story of the Bible's *Song of Solomon* told chronologically from the love's initial *longing* to its fruition...*the wedding*. *Song of the Shulamite* is an intriguing blend of both old and new elements. Since the poetry of the King James Version's *Song of Solomon* remains regarded as among the most beautiful ever written in the English language, the poetic text chosen for this setting is from the 400-year old translation. And while the piece's use of modes and Middle Eastern harmonies and idioms pointing geographically to the story's setting creates a sense of antiquity, the loosely knit chronological re-telling of the story (something not done in the Bible's *Song of Solomon*) as well its use of repetitive patterns and exotic instrumentation in the form of harp, marimba and vibraphone produce a fresh, modern interest.

Song of the Shulamite Program Notes

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(Adapted from the King James Version of *Song of Solomon*)

I. THE LONGING

Recitative & Chorus: I Charge You, O Daughters of Jerusalem

Ch. 2: v. 7 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not stir up nor awaken love till it pleases.

The Shulamite admonishes the daughters of Jerusalem (and, for that matter, the audience) not to hurry love, but to let love take its natural course.

Recitative & Arioso: Let Him Kiss Me

1:2 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for his love is better than wine.

The Shulamite tells us how wonderful her beloved is, but it's unclear if she actually knows this to be true or is simply *imagining* his kisses. The word "love" here translates as "physical expressions of love," i.e., love-making.

2:3 As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

The Shulamite says her beloved is as rare as an apple tree in a forest. The apple is a prized fruit and in this context, the words "apple" and "fruit" may be interpreted as erotic symbols. The use of "shadow" (i.e. "shade") may suggest intimacy.

1:4; 2:5 Draw me away, for I am sick with love.

She asks her beloved to come take her away, for she is faint from thinking so intensely about him.

Chorus: Do Not Stir Up Nor Awaken Love

2:7; 2:17 Do not stir up, nor awaken love until it pleases, until the day breaks, until the shadows flee away.

The chorus now issues a more full-blown admonition, echoing the Shulamite's opening words. Only when "the day breaks" and "the shadows flee away" (when all doubt is removed) should love awaken.

II. THE REASSURANCE

Recitative & Aria: I Am Dark but Lovely

1:6 Do not look down on me because I am dark, because the sun has scorched me.

At the time in which Song of Solomon was written, tanned skin was considered unattractive, because it was evidence of outdoor physical labor and, thusly, served as an indication of lower social status. The “sun” in this context may represent oppression. Like her brothers who made her work in the vineyards, it was constantly bearing down on her.

1:5 I am dark but lovely, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon; I am dark but lovely.

The Shulamite does not express self-loathing because of her darkness; rather, she expresses self-confidence and believes she is attractive.

1:6 My brothers were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept.

It is unclear why the brothers were angry with her, but what is clear is that she is self-conscious of her appearance, since working in the vineyard did not allow her to tend to her “own vineyard,” (her own body).

Chorale: Behold, Thou Art Fair

4:1 Behold, you are fair, my love;
4:7 You are all fair, my love. There is no spot in you.

Here the Shulamite receives reassurance that she is all beauty in the eyes of her beloved. His unconditional love sees no fault in her, only beauty.

Da Capo: I Am Dark but Lovely

1:5 I am dark but lovely, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon; I am dark but lovely.

III. THE OBSTACLES

Chorus: Catch Us the Foxes

2:15 Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in bloom and have tender grapes.

Foxes are a constant problem in vineyards, especially in the spring when they eat the tender grapes and uproot the vines. If the foxes are eradicated early enough, the chances of a successful harvest are exponentially increased.

Metaphorically, the couple is asking for help in overcoming the “little foxes” (the obstacles) in the spring of their relationship. Eradicating the “foxes” requires much effort, as does nurturing and tending to a relationship; but if the effort is made and a support system is in place, the chances of a long-term bond are promising.

IV. THE DREAM

Soprano & Chorus: I Sleep, but My Heart Is Awake

5:2a I sleep, but my heart is awake. Listen! Listen. My beloved knocks, saying:
5:2b Open to me, my love, my undefiled, for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.

A vivid dream...the Shulamite sleeps but her heart is awake. In the dream her beloved knocks at the door and he invites her to "open to me." Since double entendre is a common occurrence in Song of Solomon, it is reasonable to assume that his invitation can be taken both literally and figuratively.

5:3 I have put off my garment; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them?

She gives him the excuse that she has already readied herself for bed, and, having just washed her feet, she could not think of dirtying them again by answering the door.

Is she being coy? Is she stalling for time to consider his request? Does she consider this a test? Has he shown up at her door as one of the "little foxes" to spoil her vineyard?

5:4 My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my heart yearned for him.

But when he puts in his hand "by the hole of the door," her heart yearns deeply for him. (The word "heart" is actually translated as "gut," indicating that her yearning is very deep, coming from her inner most being.)

5:5 I rose up to open for my beloved; and my hands dripped with myrrh, and my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt.

Her passion having grown stronger, her fingers dripping with "liquid myrrh," she decides to open for him.

5:6 I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself and was gone. My heart failed. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.

But when she opens the doors, she discovers he has left. Perhaps this is the point where she awakens only to discover that it has all been a dream. Her heart sinks. Still full of desire for him, she calls out, but there is only silence.

5:8 If you find my beloved, tell him that I am sick with love.

The Shulamite adjures anyone who comes in contact with her beloved to reassure him that she aches for his love.

V. THE PROPOSAL

Arioso: The Voice of My Beloved

2:8 The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.
2:9 My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, he stands behind our wall, gazing forth at the windows, showing himself through the lattice.

The tone shifts and with joy the Shulamite proclaims that she hears the voice of her beloved. She describes him as a young, virile stag who will stop at nothing to get to her, even though they remain separated by a wall and a window of lattice.

In the ancient Near East, windows were narrow and made of latticework set so closely together that a person outside could not see what was

	happening inside, but those inside could easily see outside: perhaps a metaphor for both separation and desire.
2:10 My beloved spoke and said unto me:	
2:10 Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.	The beloved proposes marriage by inviting her to be with him...to “come away.”
2:11 For, lo, the winter is past and the rain is over and gone;	He reminds her that the “winter is past and the rain is over and gone,” as if to say: “We’ve dealt with the little foxes, so what are we waiting for? It’s time that we marry.”
2:12 The flowers appear on the earth, and the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.	Their love is like Spring, the time when buds blossom into flowers, when the birds sing and the sweet, gentle voice of the turtledove returns to announce Spring’s arrival.
2:13 Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.	For emphasis, the beloved repeats the words of Chapter 2, verse 10, forming an inclusion, that is, a section set off (like bookends) by a repeated text.

VI. THE WEDDING PROCESSION

Chorus: Who Is This Coming Out of the Wilderness?

General notes on the Wedding Procession: During the period of these writings the customs of the wedding day varied. But in all cases it seems that the processional was a prominent feature. The groom likely went to the bride’s house accompanied by a group of his friends, where they met the bride and her friends and family, who would join the procession, and they would all make their way to the site of the wedding ceremony. Physical union consummated the marriage the night after the wedding ceremony took place. The couple feasted with their friends—usually for seven days—following the wedding ceremony.

Many hold to the mention of King Solomon in the passage as literal, but it seems more likely that he represents any groom, or in our case, the beloved. The New American Commentary, for instance, states: “The groom of *The Song* is no more literally Solomon than he is literally a gazelle or an apple tree. Solomon is the royal figure par excellence and is a symbol for the glory that belongs to any groom.” The pillars of smoke described as the likely result of burning expensive spices are more likely the dust kicked up by the caravan. The gold and silver clad palanquin (the enclosed portable chair carried on men’s shoulders by means of projecting poles) is more likely something far more humble. You get the picture. In fact, the whole scene is very likely an exercise in exaggeration for the purposes of elevating the story to a kind of royal status that pays tribute to the importance that this special day is in the minds of these common people. And so, at least for the purposes of this work, the procession *represents* the ultimate consummation of the Shulamite and her beloved. And even though it is never mentioned, we prefer to think that “...they lived happily ever after!”

3:6 Who is this coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant spices of the merchant?	These spices were very expensive (after all, they were offered as gifts to the Christ Child), and they are being burned in such abundance as to create columns of smoke. Nothing is too extravagant for the beloved’s bride.
3:7 Behold, it is the couch of Solomon, with sixty valiant men of Israel around it, 3:8 They all hold swords, being expert in war, every man has his sword on his thigh because of fear in the night.	Armed guards are a good idea for those travelling in the wilderness. Perhaps this is a symbol of the groom’s desire to protect his bride.

<p>3:9 King Solomon made himself a palanquin of the wood of Lebanon.</p> <p>3:10 Its pillars made he of silver, its support of gold, its seat of purple and the midst thereof being paved with love for the daughters of Jerusalem.</p>	<p>Solomon travels in an enclosed carriage (palanquin) made of the finest materials that are befitting of a king.</p>
<p>3:11 Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon with the crown for the day of his wedding, the day of gladness of his heart.</p>	<p>All are invited to see this marvelous scene and witness for themselves King Solomon wearing his crown, not his royal crown, but the crown (perhaps a laurel wreath) worn by the groom on the day of his wedding, "the day of the gladness of his heart."</p>