

## Opening note

*Mosaics from the Middle East* is an exploration of Arab and Jewish music representing Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Jordan, as well as music of the Jewish diaspora in Spain, Canada, and the United States and American settings of Arabic texts and music. The program is organized into six sections: Prayer, Mother and Child, Nature, Love, Grief, and Healing and Peace. These selections describe powerful, shared human experiences through songs of devotion, ecstasy, thanksgiving, suffering, war, and human and divine love. Today's concert is intended to honor Arab and Jewish cultures and their diasporas in the West. This vision was conceived more than a year before October 7, 2023, and the choice to go through with this concert was not easy. In an unfinished poem written at the dawn of the Arab Spring and the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Syrian American poet Mohja Kahf wrote: "The earth is big enough for all of us!" We, too, long for recognition that the earth is big enough for all of us.

---

## Prayer

"Haddathani Qalbi" (My Heart Told Me About God) is a Sufi meditation by the Syrian soprano, conductor, and composer Ghada Harb, arranged for SSA choir with optional cello and *nay* (a flutelike wind instrument) by the Syrian harpist and composer Safana Bakleh. Harb and Bakleh, co-founders of the all-female Gardenia Choir, created "Haddathani Qalbi" as part of *Women Who Adored God*, an album based on poetry by Sufi women who were marginalized throughout Islamic history. The title "Haddathani Qalbi" comes from the phrase "Haddathani Qalbi 'an Rabbi," or "My heart told me about God," which expresses a core belief in Sufi mysticism: that no medium, cleric, or institution is needed to communicate directly with God. The text of "Haddathani Qalbi" consists of two words, "Allah" and "heh," which signify God and the sound of a sigh directed to a higher spirit. In *Dhikr*, a form of Sufi ritual prayer, one of the ninety-nine names of God can be extended to fill more than an hour of song through repetition and ornamentation. Through this process, "Haddathani Qalbi" brings us through the ascending stages of Sufism: doubt, love, hope, yearning, fear, intoxication or ecstasy, absence, and companionship. Each stage is intertwined with the next, bringing the soul out of the body and into connection with the divine. The music of "Haddathani Qalbi" is based on *hijazi* (melodic minor mode, also called the Arabic scale). The opening incorporates *nahawand* (natural minor). The ending mixes in elements of *kurd* (the Phrygian mode, with a lowered second scale degree), which expresses meditateness, quietness, and relief. "Haddathani Qalbi" can also be performed with *darweesh*, a dancer wearing a long white skirt who ascends through the stages of Sufism through a spinning dance called *mawlawi*. (Notes from an interview with Safana Bakleh, Jan. 26, 2024.)

"Mizmor Shir" is a setting of Psalm 92 by Srul Irving Glick (1934-2002), the celebrated Canadian Jewish composer. Glick, who spent most of his career based in Toronto, has

been honored for his choral and instrumental contributions to Jewish music. His notable works include liturgical music, orchestral works, Yiddish folk song arrangements, and Holocaust-inspired music, including the song cycle *...I never saw another butterfly...*, which sets children's poetry from the Terezín concentration camp. "Mizmor Shir" is the first work in *Psalm Trilogy*, Glick's setting of three psalms for treble choir and piano or string orchestra. The trilogy, which also includes Psalm 47 ("Lam'natzeiach Livnei Korach Mizmor") and Psalm 23 ("The Lord Is My Shepherd") was commissioned by the Toronto Children's Chorus in 1998 under the direction of Jean Ashworth Bartle. Since Psalm 92 celebrates the Sabbath day, "Mizmor Shir" begins with an optional solo by seven sopranos symbolizing the seventh day of creation. The work alternates between Hebrew and English in peaceful, prayerful homophony. Glick dedicated "Mizmor Shir" to his mother, Ida (Chaika) Glick, who was born in Bessarabia in 1901 and died in Toronto in 1997. (Notes from the score.)

### **Mother and Child**

"Yamo: A Syrian Tribute to All Mothers" is a song about motherhood based on an Armenian melody, with lyrics by the Syrian actor and singer-songwriter Duraid Lahham. In the Arab world, the simple refrain and plaintive minor melody has made "Yamo" into a famous song popularly performed on Mother's Day. This version, arranged for choir by the Palestinian Jordanian composer Shireen Abu-Khader (b. 1972), preserves the simplicity of the original folk melody with SSAA harmony, percussion, and piano or guitar. Most of the arrangement is set fairly low or mid-range in the voice, enabling the choir to use more chest voice in their color. The title, "Yamo," comes from a Syrian Arabic derivative of the word for mother from the dialect of *Al-Sham* (Damascus). Shireen Abu-Khader writes, "Not only does *Yamo* carry the beautiful meaning of motherhood, but it also holds depth in the verses that move from the physical to the spiritual. The first verse approaches motherhood in carrying a child in her womb, an internal and personal feeling that is felt only between mother and child; it is theirs to hold and keep. The second verse speaks of the mother's sacrifice in the physical world: the mother who works, feeds and keeps her children warm. The last verse moves to the spiritual plea of the child to their mother to forgive them for all their wrongdoings. The child also asks God to bless their mother and keep her safe. Because the Arabic language is gendered, mother can take other meanings, such as one's country (the Egyptians would say, 'Egypt is the mother of the world'). It also automatically carries adjectives of strength, persistence, endurance, compassion, and hope. In the Arabic language, the word mother represents a powerful symbol." (Notes from the score.)

"Durme" (Sleep) is a Ladino folk lullaby arranged for treble choir by Laura Hassler, an American choir director and founder of the nonprofit Musicians Without Borders. Ladino, also known as Judeo-Spanish, is a thousand-year-old language that developed from Old Castilian Spanish and became known as the language of the Sephardic Jews after their expulsion from Spain in 1492. "Durme" was famously recorded by Miriam Baruch in 1943 and archived in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. It was also later arranged for choir by the influential American composer Alice Parker. The text describes a mother soothing her child to sleep with the words of Sh'ma Yisrael, an

ancient Jewish prayer recited at morning and night which includes fundamental statements of Jewish belief, references to important symbols of Judaism like *tefillin* and *mezuzah*, and exhortations to remember the Lord's commandments and the Exodus from Egypt. Hassler's choral arrangement sets the haunting melody of "Durme" in B minor. In tonight's performance, the first verse will be performed in unison, and the second verse will be performed in parts. (Background information on Ladino and the "Durme" melody from The Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America and the Women's Chorus of Dallas.)

## Nature

"Badru Tam" (The Full Moon) is a meditation on the beauty of natural landscapes by the Palestinian composer Abdel Hamid Hamam (b. 1943). Hamam, whose career has been based in Jordan, was born in Lydda, immigrated to Damascus, and later studied in Vienna, Paris, and the United Kingdom. "Badru Tam" is a setting of *muwashah* poetry by Muhammad ibn Ubada al-Qazzaz, an 11<sup>th</sup> century Arabic poet who lived in the Andalusian city of Almería on the Iberian Peninsula. The *muwashah*, which is both a poetic and a musical form, features a strophic structure with a rhyming refrain. In "Badru Tam," a two-part treble choir sings a simple, largely stepwise D minor melody in canon. There are three verses, set in short, rhymed phrases in old standard Arabic, which describe a landscape brought to life by the moon, the sun, and the musky scent of blossoms. The refrain, by contrast, consists of ornamented repetitions of "ya layl" (O night) – a phrase that is often used in Arabic song to extend and improvise upon the music, thereby showing off the singer's voice. (Information from the score and from an interview with Suzanne Wali, USC Master Lecturer in Arabic, Jan. 23, 2024.)

"Mayim, Mayim" (Water, Water) is a popular Hebrew folk song by Emanuel Amiran-Pugashov (1909-1993), a prolific Israeli composer and music teacher of Russian descent. Born in Warsaw, Amiran received his early music education in Moscow, later emigrating to Palestine and pursuing further musical studies in London. After the founding of Israel and the formation of the Israeli Army, Amiran served as the First Officer for music and later as the central inspector for music education in the Israeli Ministry of Education. With an output comprising more than six hundred songs, Amiran is credited as one of the composers who developed the "typical Israeli folksong." "Mayim, Mayim," one of his most well-known tunes, celebrates the life-giving miracle of water. The song has also achieved fame as a popular folk dance that is traditionally performed up-tempo in a joyful circle. This arrangement for treble choir, piano, and violins was written in 1996 by the American choir director Valerie Shields (b. 1951) during her tenure as the assistant director of the Northwest Girlchoir. The original melody is set in D minor in the alto line with a soprano descant above. (Information from ECS Publishing and Grove Music Online, "Amiran-Pugashov, Emanuel.")

## Love

"Lamma Bada Yatathanna" (As She Swayed) is a setting of one of the most famous Arabic *muwashahat* of the last one thousand years. The text was written by the

Andalusian poet Lisan Al-Din Ibn Al-Khatib (1313-1374), and the music was written in 1850 by the Egyptian composer and singer Mohamed Abdel Rahim Al-Masloub (1793-1928). This version was arranged for choir by the Palestinian Jordanian composer Shireen Abu-Khader (b. 1972), who is known for her work composing, publishing, and lifting up the music of the Levant region. Abu-Khader writes, “The *muwashah* is written as per special rhymes and rhythms and incorporates both colloquial and classical Arabic. This type of poem is written to be sung... The word *muwashah* originated from the word *wishah*, an Arabic word for a scarf embroidered with precious stones. The *muwashah* was also likened to jewelry worn by women, consisting of two earrings made of pearls and precious stones that were connected while being positioned inversely... The word *muwashah* could also be interpreted as ‘veiled,’ due to the veiled or hidden mystery of who is singing to whom: is it man to woman, woman to man, man to man, man to God, woman to landscape? The possibilities are endless, and the interpretation of the lyrics is left to the discretion of the listener.” As in “Badru Tam,” each couplet ends with ornamented repetitions of “ya layl” (O night) – a phrase that is often used in Arabic song to extend and improvise upon the music, thereby showing off the singer’s voice. (Notes from the score and from an interview with Suzanne Wali, USC Master Lecturer in Arabic, Jan. 23, 2024.)

*Five Hebrew Love Songs* is a choral song cycle by American composer Eric Whitacre (b. 1970) setting original poetry by his former wife, Hila Plitmann, who was born and raised in Jerusalem. This version, arranged for treble choir, violin, and piano, was commissioned by the Efroni Choir in Israel. Whitacre writes, “Each of the songs captures a moment that Hila and I shared together. “Kalá Kallá” (which means ‘light bride’) was a pun I came up with while she was first teaching me Hebrew. The bells at the beginning of “Eyze Shelleg” are the exact pitches that awakened us each morning in Germany as they rang from a nearby cathedral.” Today’s performance features three out of five pieces in *Five Hebrew Love Songs*. No. 1, “Temuná” (A picture), is one of the shortest songs in the set at only twenty measures. The violin and choir perform a coy duet, sketching a wistful vignette without ever firmly establishing a single mode or key. No. 2, “Kalá kallá” (Light bride), features two alternating themes: a languid, almost melancholy melody on the title words of the poem, and a joyful, up-tempo mixed-meter dance with tambourine. Almost the entire song is in unison. Finally, No. 5, “Rakút” (Tenderness), combines percussive effects in the alto line with sinuous, ornamented melodies in the soprano line. Borrowing the same harmonic language as “Temuná,” this closing song hints at multiple modes (Lydian, Mixolydian, and Aeolian or natural minor). The opening violin melody returns in the final bars of the piece. (Notes from the score.)

## **Grief**

“My People Are Rising” is a setting of an eponymous poem by the Syrian American poet Mohja Kahf, with music by the American composer Carol Barnett (b.1949). Kahf’s original unfinished poem, which was shortened and adapted with permission for this work, was written in 2011 at the dawn of the Arab Spring and the beginning of civil war in Syria. Kahf writes about a massive, earth-shaking uprising of Kurds, Assyrians, Arabs, Qajars, Christians, Alawites, and Druze, who were met with armed and lethal

oppression. In her notes, Barnett writes that Kahf's poetry "spoke so viscerally of the tragic events in Syria that it was impossible for me to imagine setting it with Western harmonies. And so began an exploration of Arabic music, with its quarter-tone scales, its lack of vertical chordal structure, its abundantly ornamented heterophony." Barnett's setting is largely monophonic, with the soprano and alto lines often singing in unison or else echoing each other in canon. The work is scored with an elaborately ornamented violin solo and improvised percussion on the *doumbek*, an Egyptian drum. (Notes from the score.)

"Ahuv Sheli" (My Beloved) is a setting of a Hebrew poem set to music by Sharon Farber (b.1965), an Israeli composer of film, television, and concert music. Farber studied film scoring and composition at the Berklee College of Music in Boston and is based in Los Angeles. The text of "Ahuv Sheli" was written by the Israeli poet Nathan Yonatan (1923-2004), whose son Lior was killed in the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Yonatan's poem expresses this devastating loss in three stanzas, each addressing his son with the title words, "my beloved," and closing with the words, "a sorrowful dream of beauty and a smile that will never fade." Farber writes that these words particularly moved her: "Much like Nathan Yonatan's way of showing feelings without being melodramatic, I have tried to deal with this phrase in a unique way at the end of each verse; twice in a delicate, self-reflected way, but then eventually, the author is crying out his pain, and the music cries with him. Yet, he immediately quiets down to the final statement, knowing that his son will not come back, slowly ending the same way it started, with the simple, yet painful words, "ahuv sheli – my beloved." "Ahuv sheli" is scored for four-part treble choir with clarinet, bassoon, violin, cello, and piano. (Notes from the score.)

"Even When God Is Silent" is one of the most well-known contemporary Holocaust memorial choral works, commissioned for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. The piece was written by Michael Horvit (b.1932), an American composer and longtime professor of composition and theory at the University of Houston. Horvit, who is known for his instrumental works and Jewish liturgical compositions, chose a now-famous poem found written on the wall of a basement in Germany by someone hiding from the Gestapo: "I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. / I believe in love even when feeling it not. / I believe in God even when God is silent." Horvit set this poem for a *cappella* choir in simple four-part harmony, allowing the power of the text to speak for itself. In today's performance, VOX Femina will perform an alternate ending that is set lower in the voice, closing with the choir singing in unison.

### **Peace/Healing**

"Bes Inshafat bi Jamal" (But How Beautifully It Healed) is an Arabic choral work originally scored for mixed choir with piano and optional horn by American composer Alex T. Favazza, Jr., Director of Choral Studies at Southwest Baptist University. The version that will be performed today is for four-part treble choir with piano and cello and was commissioned by VOX Femina Los Angeles for this concert. Favazza sets an original poem by Raneen Sfeir, a Palestinian American musician. The text uses a

combination of colloquial and modern standard Arabic to describe healing and regrowth. Favazza writes, “When I was forming the concept for the piece, I asked Raneen to write a poem in Arabic that captured the theme of new beginnings, redemption, and healing. At this time in our people’s history, we need respect and unity more than ever. I wanted to capture the spirit of regeneration and reconciliation. The opening **instrumental** solo over piano pedal paints a feeling of mystery and prepares the ear for the A section where ‘fire burns yesterday.’ The two themes of this section are passed from part to part using a minor chromatic mediant relationship. The piece culminates with the text ‘how beautifully it healed’ in a sweet major theme that alternates between **the voices and instruments**. The final section brings back the instrumental introduction and the A themes, but this time, in a major chromatic mediant relationship. The work ends with a declamatory choral tag: ‘but let us proceed with love,’ which is written to inspire and invigorate the audience to consider life as a passionate work of love.” (Adapted notes from the score.)

“Oseh Shalom” (God Who Makes Peace) is one of the most well-known prayers in Jewish liturgy set to music by Nurit Hirsh (b.1942), an Israeli composer and conductor who has written more than a thousand Hebrew songs as well as music for theater, television, and children. This version was arranged for choir, clarinet, piano, and solo singer by the American conductor and scholar Joshua Jacobson (b.1948). The text of “Oseh Shalom” comes from the final line of the Kaddish, an Aramaic prayer from the 13<sup>th</sup> century that praises the goodness and holiness of God. The mourner’s Kaddish is the most well-known form of this prayer, but the Kaddish is a common part of all traditional Jewish prayer services and is used as a transitional prayer separating sections of the service. The text of “Oseh Shalom” expresses the belief that God will bring peace to Israel and all the inhabitants of the world. It is often performed with a joyful, up-tempo melody. Hirsh’s iconic setting of “Oseh Shalom” has been arranged for choir by many composers. Jacobson’s version opens with an *adagio* vocal solo with clarinet and piano, then moves into a lively *vivace* when the choir enters.

“Shalom Aleichem” (Peace Be Unto You) is a new work by American composer Craig Taubman (b.1958), commissioned by VOX Femina Los Angeles for this concert. A Tennessee native, Taubman is known for his music for film and television, his Jewish contemporary music, and his prolific output of educational Jewish music for children, as well as his work on the Pico Union Project, a multifaith cultural arts center in downtown Los Angeles. *Shalom aleichem / Salam alaikum* is a traditional greeting in both Hebrew and Arabic that means, “Peace be unto you.” In Arabic, this greeting is often informally shortened simply to “Salam.” In Hebrew, “Shalom aleichem” constitutes the opening words of a longer prayer that is traditionally sung on Friday nights at the beginning of Shabbat. Taubman’s setting of this Hebrew prayer is for vocal soloist, treble choir, and piano. The middle section features a spoken dialogue that refers to the English and Arabic translation of the Hebrew prayer, followed by a trio of soloists singing English, Hebrew, and Arabic versions of the text concurrently. “Shalom Aleichem” concludes with an *a cappella* choral diminuendo blessing the name of God.