

Alexander Massey

V'erastich Li

I betroth you to me
A wedding song
(2 equal voices & piano)

including an essay-commentary
on the text and music

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V'erastich Li

וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי לְעוֹלָם
וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי בְצֶדֶק וּבְמִשְׁפָּט וּבְחֶסֶד
וּבְרַחֲמִים: כֹּבֵד וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי בְּאַמּוּנָה וְיָדַעַת אֶת־יְהוָה

V'erastich li l'olam.

V'erastich li b'tzedek uv'mishpat, uv'chesed uv'rachamim.

V'erastich li b'emunah, v'yada'at et Adonai.

The text of *V'erastich Li* (Hosea 2:21-22) comes from a book that is often regarded as an elaborate extended metaphor, in which we are (probably) intended to understand that Israel has been disloyal to God, and the relationship has to be repaired. By contrast, God is portrayed as constantly loving, forgiving, and faithful. The two verses used here represent God's statement of dedication.

Orthodox Jewish men recite this text every day as the last step of the 'laying *tefillin*' ritual in which they rededicate themselves to God every morning. With leather straps, they bind a small box to their forehead, and another to their arm, the boxes containing certain Torah verses. In the last part of the ritual, they recite the Hosea verses, whilst wrapping the straps around their finger, like a ring.

The other area of Jewish life where *V'erastich Li* has become widely used is in weddings. While it is not part of the official ceremony or prayers, it has become very popular to sing a setting of it as part of the celebrations. In communities where a halachic approach (i.e. following Talmudic / Rabbinic rulings) is favoured, only a male says a vow: *Harei at m'kud'shet li b'tabaat zo k'dat Moshe v'Yisrael* 'Behold, you are betrothed to me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and of Israel'; were a bride also to give a ring, then the 'gift of value' from the groom would be cancelled out, which is why it is a one-way transaction in such communities. However, Progressive and other Jews have for many years favoured greater demonstration of gender equality in the ceremony. An alternative to 'transaction' or 'acquisition' in the wedding ceremony has been found by sometimes replacing the halachic vow with both partners saying the two Hosea verses. In contemporary life, this also offers the advantage of allowing for mutual commitment in same-sex couples.

The Hebrew letters *yud-heh-vav-heh* are the unpronounceable name of God. Many automatically say *Adonai* when speaking these verses. However, I wanted to move away from this formulation. It has many centuries of association of a severe, masculine God-figure called 'Lord' in English. *Adonai* fails to express the fluidity and perhaps even feminine tone of the four letters that grow out of the verb 'to be' or even 'to become'. When we enter into conscious I-You relationship, with God, or with another human being, that relationship becomes a sacred container for both of us to evolve both as individuals and together. It is a space for continuous 'becoming'. We make

covenant with another, knowing we will both change, and committing to supporting each other's changing self. *Havayah*, a word that hints at the connection to the fluidity of the verb, seems a better God-name to use here. *V'yada'at* - 'and you shall know'. This is deep knowing, and is the same verb for sacred sexual union, the knowing of the other and being known by the other through merging. So, for me, this text also teaches that through deep commitment to the other, and to the sacredness of I-You relationship itself, we come to embrace a mystical knowing of what Becoming is.

Before looking at how I have set these words to music, it is important to understand what else I believe is encoded in the text. Though I have not been able to find any writings on the subject, my own view is that this text must be embedded in kabbalistic theory. Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) uses a metaphor called the Tree of Life with which to understand human experience, personality and spirituality, and how to relate this to God. On the Tree are 10 points, called *sefirot* (s. *sefirah*) which correspond to, for example, human personality traits and attributes of God. These are traditionally arranged on a diagram of three connecting 'pillars'. The Hosea verses mention 7 characteristics: *olam*, *tzedek*, *mishpat*, *chesed*, *rachamim*, *emunah*, and *da'at*. Five of them take us all the way up the middle pillar of the Tree of Life: (1) *Olam* (more on this later), can mean the 'world', and relates to the *sefirah* of *Malkhut* (kingdom) at the base of the middle pillar; (2) *tzedek* (righteousness/justice) traditionally links to *Yesod* ('foundation'); (5) *rachamim* (compassion) links to *Tiferet* ('beauty'); (6) *da'at* (knowledge), is a special point associated integrally with the middle pillar of the Tree but not officially on it; and (7) *emunah* (faithfulness) is linked to *Keter* ('crown'), located at the top of the Tree and associated with the ineffability of God. The remaining two characteristics are each situated on one of the two outside pillars: (3) *Mishpat* (law) corresponds to the disciplined boundaries of *gevurah* ('strength') on the left hand pillar, while (4) *Chesed* (loving-kindness) corresponds to the expansiveness of *Chesed* on the right hand pillar. By using all of the *sefirot* of the middle pillar of the Tree, and one *sefirah* from each of the outside pillars, Hosea 2:21-22 symbolically encodes - 'hides' - all of the Tree (although not naming all the *sefirot* on the outer pillars) in the two verses. *Olam*, when spelled with the Hebrew letters *ayin-lamed-mem*, means 'to hide'; when spelled *ayin-vav-lamed-mem*, it means 'the world', or 'eternity'. The letter *vav* in the second spelling is kabbalistically understood as representing God; so God ('*vav*') is 'hidden' (*olam*) in the world (*olam*) and, by implication, embodied in the loving partnership between two people. I have used the number 10 (from the 10 *sefirot* on the Tree of Life) to symbolise God embedded in the marriage, and 'hidden' it in the music by making each section 10 bars long.

In the Talmud (Sotah 17a), Rabbi Akiva taught: "When husband and wife are worthy, the *Shekhinah* (God's Presence) abides with them; when they are not worthy, fire consumes them." This saying holds within it another teaching. The Hebrew word for man, *ish*, is spelled *aleph-yud-shin*; *ishah* (woman) is spelled *aleph-shin-heh*. Both words contain the letters *aleph* and *shin*, which spell *eish*, meaning 'fire', which means there can be fiery passion in a relationship. But without something to temper the fire of passion, it could become destructive. What will keep the relationship in balance? The remaining letters *yud* and *heh*, spell one of the names of God; God must be in the marriage if it is to survive. So there is an extra reason for God (*Adonai* – the last word of the Hosea text) – and the number 10 - to be musically encoded into the music.

My English lyric follows the Hebrew very closely, but I have interpreted *tzedek* (righteousness) with a little licence. There is a long controversial history in Judaism about whether husband and wife are considered equals, and what that might mean. In a world with same-sex partnerships as well, the question becomes even more interesting. *Tzedek* is about righting wrongs, and is concerned with ensuring that someone who has greater wealth or power does not use that to their advantage against those who are not so fortunate. So I have used the word 'equality' for *tzedek*. I see some precedent for this in traditional teaching. In Gen 2:18 God says: "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a helper (*ezer*) suitable (*k'negdo*) for him." We are not to think of this helper as a servant, someone with secondary status in the relationship. Rashi, the famous 11th century rabbi who wrote one of the foremost Torah commentaries, taught: "If he is worthy she shall be a help (*ezer*) to him; if he is unworthy she shall fight him / be opposed (*k'negdo*) to him." A life partner is an equal and balancing force in a person's life.

Learning deeply about the traditions and teachings around a text, as well as discovering what might not yet have been said about it, is always the starting point for my setting it to music. At some point, an opening musical motif comes into my mind, and that provides the seed from which the piece will grow. The melodic shapes and harmonies reflect both the meanings of the words, and their pairings: compare the concise melodic shape of *tzedek*/equality paired with *mishpat*/fairness, and the more lyrical lines and exotic harmonies of *chesed*/kindness paired with *rachamim*/compassion.

As this composition took shape, number symbolism became part of the structure. One of the customs at a Jewish wedding is for a bride to circle the groom; different reasons are given for this, but I like to think of it as the couple weaving their lives together. The number of circles varies between communities but is either 3 or 7; note that there are 3 statements of *v'erastich li* in Hosea 2:21-22, and the 7 characteristics I referred to earlier. God is 'hidden' in my music with each section lasting 10 bars, which is 3+7. The opening line occurs 3 times in the piece (at letters A, D and G). There are 7 main sections (plus a 2 bar introduction, and a 5 bar ending in bb 73-77), and the whole piece is 77 bars long (a multiple of 7).

The concept of equality in the partnership is a key feature of the musical design of the duet. [NB The solo voice + piano edition adapts much of the 2nd voice into the piano part and its inner melodies.] Each voice gets an equal opportunity to take the lead and sing the upper melody. For example, after partner 1 sings *tzedek* (b 17), partner 2 sings *mishpat* (b 18); when this music comes again they swap, so voice 2 sings 'equality' (b 27), and voice 1 sings 'fairness' (b 28), and so on throughout the piece. At the beginning, at letter A, the two partners make an individual vow to each other. When this theme returns at letter D, the two voices are now bound in harmony, as the relationship has deepened. When we reach the word *yada'at* 'know' (b 49) the voices combine in the sensual relative key of Bb for the first time. *Da'at* has a particular connotation in Hebrew, indicating deep knowledge, born of long experience and devotion, and is also the verb for loving sexual union (Adam 'knew' Eve). So it is

through eternal (*olam*) commitment, *tzedek*, *mishpat*, *chesed*, *rachamim* and *emunah* that partners come to know each other deeply, and simultaneously to know God (*Adonai*). At letter G, the final section, both voices sing the same melody, in canon; unlike the older ritual, no longer does one partner circle, but in this music they circle each other. In the closing moments of the piece, the voices finally sing the same melody together (bb 72-73) on *l'olam* 'forever' – the circle is complete.

One of the joys of composing sacred and liturgical music is that I learn so much through text study. I hadn't expected to see a link between the Hosea verses and *kabbalah*, or to be reminded that living the 7 characteristics draws the *shekhinah*, the Divine Presence, into our and others' lives. The Hebrew word *shekhinah* shares the same root as *mishkan* (meaning 'dwelling'), the Tabernacle ('dwelling place for God') that was carried through the wilderness wherever the Israelites went. At Shabbat, we openly welcome the 'Sabbath bride', the *shekhinah*, marking out a *mishkan*, a sacred space in time, to re-dedicate ourselves to God. Perhaps we could experiment with liturgical innovation, and find other moments in Jewish life to sing the words of *V'erastich li*, at Shavuot (accepting the Covenant), or on a Friday evening at Kabbalat Shabbat?

Performance notes:

1. The Hebrew is in the future tense, meaning 'I will betroth you'. However, it is common practice to retain the original Hebrew at a wedding, even though it is clearly understood to imply present tense in the context of the day. This is why the English lyric has been worded 'I betroth you'. Purists might choose to sing 'I'll betroth you'.
2. The piece was conceived originally as a duet for two voices of equal pitch range (tenor & soprano, bass and mezzo/alto, or two voices of the same gender) for reasons outlined in the essay. However, it also works well as a solo.
3. The piece can be adapted to different situations and Jewish traditions. For those who do not use musical instruments at a wedding, the piece can be performed unaccompanied, either as duet or solo. For those who want to use only Hebrew, sections C and F could be left out altogether, and sections D and G could be sung in Hebrew. The piece takes about 3 minutes to sing, but if time is short, one of sections B and C (which mean the same thing and have the same music) could be cut; for the same reason, one of E or F could be cut.

V'EIRASTICH LI (I BETROTH YOU TO ME)

Music & English Lyrics: Alexander Massey

Hebrew Text: Hosea 2:19-20

Light, joyful ♩ = 108

A

mp V' - ei-ras-tich — li

mp V' - ei - ras - tich

mp sempre leggiero

B

7 I'-o - lam, mf v' -

li I'-o - lam, mf v' -

13 ei - ras - tich li b' - tze - dek

ei - ras - tich li mf u-v'-mish-

13

18

u-v' - che - - - sed *f* I be -

pat - u - v' - ra - cha - mim. *f* I be -

C

23

troth you to me and

troth you to me with e - qua - li - ty,

28

fair-ness, and com - pas -

and kind - - - ness,

32 *mp* **D**

- sion. I be - troth you to me, I be - troth you to -

mf I be - troth you to me, I be - troth you to -

32

mp

37

me for e - ver, for - ev - er. *f* V' -

me for e - ver, for - ev - er. *f* V' -

37

Bring out the piano
tune to b.48

f

E

ei - ras - tich li *f* v'-ya-

ei - ras - tich li b' - e - mu - nah

43

mp

49

da - - - at et Ha - va - yah. **f** I be - troth

mf v'-ya-da - at et Ha - va - yah. I be - troth

Bring out lower part of the piano right hand

54

you to me, with a faith - ful heart,

you to me and

59

and you shall em - brace and know Be - com - ing. **mf*** V'- I be -

you shall em - brace and know Be - com - ing

G

ei - ras - tich li, v' - ei - ras - tich li
troth you to me, I be - troth you to me, I be - troth ras -

mf V' - ei - ras - tich li, v' - ei - ras -
I be - troth you to me, I be - troth

I' - o - lam, I' - o - lam, I' - o - lam.
for e - ver, for e - ver, for e - ver

tich li I' - o - lam, *mp* I' - o - lam.
you to me for - ev - er, for - ev -

ver. er.

וארשתיך לי לעולם
וארשתיך לי בצדק ובמשפט, ובחסד וברחמים
הוזה וארשתיך לי באמונה ונדעת את-
וארשתיך לי וארשתיך לי לעולם

* Note: At letter G, sing whichever language is preferred to finish the song.