

Salamone Rossi's *Songs by Solomon* as a Song of Songs and Song of Ascents

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And behold, a ladder placed on earth, and the top of
it reaches heaven.

Genesis 28:12

Salamone Rossi (ca. 1570–ca. 1628) occupies a special place in music history as the earliest outstanding Jewish composer to work in the European tradition. Active at the court of Mantua from 1589 on, Rossi published thirteen collections, among them one with thirty-three Hebrew works for three to eight voices, his *Ha-shirim asher li-Shelomo*, or *The Songs by Solomon* (1623), the first of their kind (he “began something that did not exist in this form in Israel”).¹ Surprisingly, the collection has never been considered for its relation to the Song of Songs, the title of which, in its first verse, continues “by Solomon” (“Shir ha-shirim asher li-Shelomo”), here King Solomon. Beyond playfully naming the collection after the biblical source, did the composer, himself a Solomon, have more substantial connections in mind? Since the Song of Songs can be read as a trope for the ascent of humans to commune with their Maker, to what extent does *The Songs by Solomon* qualify as a song of ascents?

1. SALAMONE ROSSI, *Ha-shirim asher li-Shelomo (The Songs by Solomon)*, Venice 1623; quotation from foreword by LEON MODENA, fol. 3a. All translations here and elsewhere, including those from the Hebrew Bible, are the author's. References to chapter and verse follow their numbering in the same Hebrew source.

The Songs by Solomon as a Song of Songs

Tradition has it that apart from the Song of Songs, Solomon (tenth century BC) wrote the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes,² and, within the apocrypha, the “Wisdom of Solomon”.³ Just as Solomon was renowned for his “wisdom”, in Hebrew *hokhmah*, also “science”, so the composer Salamone was praised for his musical knowledge: “he alone is exalted nowadays in this science”, namely, the “science of music” (*hokhmat ha-musikah*).⁴ The words refer to the portrayal of Solomon, in 1 Kings 5:9–11, as wiser than all humans throughout time.⁵

The wedding ode that closes *The Songs by Solomon* ascribes great wealth to the man who sells everything he owns to acquire a wise wife.⁶ In Proverbs a woman of virtue opens “her mouth with wisdom” and brings honor on her husband, winning his praises and her children's blessings.⁷ As if in preparation for the wedding ode, *The Songs by Solomon* has, two items earlier, the verse (after Proverbs 4:7): “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord; good understanding is for whoever observes His laws”;⁸ and, one item earlier, the verse: “A person of ignorance will not know and a fool will not understand all that.”⁹

2. Proverbs 1:1: “The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel”; Ecclesiastes 1:1: “The words of Ecclesiastes [Greek for ‘preacher’], the son of David, king of Jerusalem”.

3. The first part is probably a translation from the Hebrew, the second a continuation in Greek by the one who, in the first century BC, translated the first.

4. MODENA (as in n. 1). On the role of wisdom in the formation of Hebrew art music, see DON HARRÁN, “‘Dum recordaremur Sion’: Music in the Life and Thought of the Venetian Rabbi Leon Modena (1571–1648)”, *Association for Jewish Studies Review*, XXIII, 1998, pp. 18, 20–21, 46–49.

5. Yohanan Alemanno (d. after 1504) was largely responsible for the diffusion of the notion, in Jewish thought, of Solomon as the epitome of wisdom. See ARTHUR LESLEY, “*The Song of Solomon's Ascents*”, by Yohanan Alemanno: *Love and Human Perfection According to a Jewish Colleague of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley 1976.

6. *The Songs by Solomon*, no. 33, stanza 4.

7. Proverbs 31, respectively verses 26, 23, and 28.

8. No. 31, a setting of Psalms 111, here the final verse (10).

9. No. 32, a setting of Psalms 92, here verse 7 (out of sixteen).

On a closer look, *The Songs by Solomon* (*Sgs-Sol*) shares some of its vocabulary with the Song of Songs (*Sg-Sgs*). Thus the expression “let us rejoice and be glad for you” (*Sg-Sgs* 1:4, “you” meaning the bride) occurs in Psalms 118:24 (*Sgs-Sol* 22). “Until the king at his banquet” (*Sg-Sgs* 1:10) and “my beloved, shining and ruddy” (*Sg-Sgs* 5:10), both in reference to Solomon, occur in the hymn “I will begin a song on my lips” (*Eftah shir bi-sefatai*; *Sgs-Sol* 27, stanzas 2 and 3). “His look is like Lebanon, a happy good fellow like cedars” (*Sg-Sgs* 5:16) alludes to Psalms 29:5: “The voice of the Lord will break cedars; the Lord will bring the cedars of Lebanon” (*Sgs-Sol* 24) and, again, to Psalms 92:13: “The righteous man will bloom like a cedar, he will thrive like a cedar in Lebanon” (*Sgs-Sol* 32).¹⁰ Within the wedding ode, “I desire” (*ehpots*) and “maiden” (*almah*), in stanza 1, recall “awaken my love until you desire” (*tehpats*; *Sg-Sgs* 2:7, 3:5, 8:4) and “thus do the maidens [*almot*] love you” (*Sg-Sgs* 1:2), while “ewe” (*rahel*), in stanza 6, recalls “your teeth are like a horde of ewes” (*ha-rehelim*; *Sg-Sgs* 6:6).

The Song of Songs is of course about a “wedding”; indeed, “bride” occurs in six different verses (*Sg-Sgs* 4:8–12, 5:1), with specific references to matrimony in “King Solomon had a wedding chariot made” and “Go out and see, daughters of Zion, Solomon and the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his nuptials and on the day his heart gladdened” (*Sg-Sgs* 3:9, 3:11). Not only has the Song of Songs been treated, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as an allegory for a wedding, with God the ‘groom’ and Israel ‘the bride’,¹¹ but its chapters were likened by the seventeenth-century prelate Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet to “wedding odes”.¹²

In stanza 1 of Rossi’s wedding ode, the “man” (*gever*) and “maiden” (*almah*) enter into wedlock (or “pairing”: *zivvug*). In stanza 2 (“Before God formed / a soul from the treasury, / its place was ordained: / it

was assigned to its mate”), the “maiden”, or Israel, is equated with a “soul” (*neshamah*), as was already implied at the end of stanza 1, where a playful echo on “maiden” (*almah*) suggests the Italian reading “soul” (*alma*); her “mate” (*ben zug*) was her husband, more broadly God (the Talmud reports: “There is a treasure and its name is a body, and from the beginning all souls to be born in the future were created and consecrated to the Lord”).¹³ In stanza 9, “the craving of a wife” – alias maiden, soul, Israel – “is for her husband” – alias God – as a source of life (“it is he who makes and forms her”). In stanza 11, the same “he” is identified as God Almighty (*El Shaddai*), then entreated for His “everlasting” blessing on the newlyweds (“everlasting” here is *le-’alma*, with the portion *’alma(h)*, as we already know, denoting “maiden” in Hebrew and “soul” in Italian).

Just as, in the Hebrew Bible, all books treat God’s relation with His people while the outwardly secular Song of Songs lifts the relation to a more exalted plane, so, in *The Songs by Solomon*, all previous numbers are prayers or psalms directed to the God of Israel, to praise Him or beseech His favor, while the last, outwardly secular, piece refers metaphorically to a “sacred wedding”. The wedding ode elevates *The Songs* to new heights.

The Songs by Solomon as a song of ascents¹⁴

The line of ascent may be traced by means of a “ladder” (*sullam*), a key word in the collection. Not only did the composer dedicate it to his patron Moses Sullam, but he adds: “Behold, the ladder [*sullam*] of your glory and majesty is placed on the earth while its summit reaches the heavens.”¹⁵ He “chose a ladder [*sullam*] for his collection. . .to rise on it as a support”¹⁶ for praising and glorifying the Holy One in his *Songs*.

10. On Lebanon as a metaphor for “wisdom”, see MOSHE IDEL, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven 1988, p. 182.

11. Its allegorization proceeded in two directions: the Jewish, the Christian. In the New Testament, for example, Christ is the bridegroom and the Church his bride (John 3:29).

12. JACQUES-BÉNIGNE BOSSUET, *Libri Salomonis, Canticum Canticorum* (Paris 1693); compare *Œuvres complètes de Bossuet, évêque de Meaux*, I, Paris 1856, pp. 247–265, esp. 249.

13. Talmud Bavli, *Avodah zarah*, fol. 5a.

14. “Song of ascents” is after the fifteen Gradual Psalms 120–134, so called from their first verse (“Shir ha-ma’alot” or the alternative reading “Shir la-ma’alot”, a song of degrees).

15. *The Songs by Solomon*, dedication, fol. 2a.

16. From the third dedicatory poem to the collection (fol. 4a). The notion of “rising” would apply to Moses ascending Mount Sinai, as for example in Exodus 19:3 and Deuteronomy 9:9.

The ascent may also be traced in the composer's purposeful choice, for his texts, of various "songs of ascent", namely Psalms 121, 124, 126, and, in three different compositions, Psalms 128.¹⁷ True, 'height' had already been suggested at the beginning of the collection, in the Kaddish (no. 1: "Blessed and praised and glorified and *elevated and exalted*...*High above, high above* all blessings, songs, praises, and consolations that we offer in this world...May He who makes peace *on His heights*...") and is strengthened toward the end (no. 32: "You are *on high* forever, Lord"; and in the wedding ode, no. 33, "*over his house* will she be *lifted*") (italics are this author's, for emphasis). Its most concrete simulation is in the music itself. Nos. 30, 32, and 33 consummate the ascent by having recitation on pitches at the upper extremity of the vocal register. Though it was commonplace in music of the time to respond pictorially to words of ascent, what is noteworthy, in Rossi's "Songs", is the extent of this recitation. Thus in no. 32 (Psalms 92), the music, for the first two verses, starts, atypically, at the top of the range, on a", then climbs gradually from f" to a", reaching its peak on "to sing unto Your name, Most High" (Example 1).

Example 1

SALAMONE ROSSI, *The Songs by Solomon* (1623), no. 32, "Mizmor shir le-yom ha-shabbat" (for eight voices), in the composer's *Complete Works*, ed. DON HARRÁN, Neuhausen-Stuttgart and Middleton, Wis. 1995–2003, 13 vols., specifically XIII/2, pp. 202–214, verses 1–2: "A psalm to be sung on the day of the Sabbath. It is good to thank the Lord and sing unto Your name, Most High [*Elyon*]" (canto 1, mm. 1–18).

Verse 6 has its capstone on "Lord" and verse 9 on "You are on high forever, Lord." But the real climax comes toward the end, where the singers declaim relentlessly, passionately, on a" (Example 2).

17. Psalms 121, *The Songs by Solomon*, no. 18; 124, no. 21; 126, no. 17; 128, nos. 2, 12, 20.

Example 2

The Songs by Solomon, no. 32, verse 16: "To declare the integrity of the Lord, my rock, with no iniquity in Him" (canto 1, mm. 138–149).

The momentum is retained in the wedding ode (no. 33), where climbing scales portray the groom's "lifting" of his bride: they reach high g's and a's, on which the singers ardently declare the couple's honor and virtue (Example 3) and, at the end, ask that God Almighty bless the couple for all time (Example 4).

Example 3

The Songs by Solomon, no. 33, "Le-mi ehpots" (for eight voices), *Complete Works*, XIII/2, pp. 215–228, stanza 7: "and over his house will she be lifted [*ramah*]. The nations will see their honor day after day and how, united in virtue, they keep from evil devices" (canto 1, with echo in the sesto, mm. 106–128).

Example 4

The Songs by Solomon, no. 33, stanza 11: "May You, God Almighty, bless my friends, forever, without cease" (canto 1, mm. 163–174).

The effect of these 'lifted' passages, where the music scales the heights to signal union with God *in excelsis*, is exhilarating. One is reminded of the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, where, for similar reasons (rejoicing, unity), the music spirals upward. Beethoven introduces his utopian dream of brotherhood, after Friedrich von Schiller's "Ode an die Freude" ("Ode to Joy"; 1786), with the words "O friends, not these [plaintive] sounds. Rather let us sing more cheerful, more joyful songs" (as, by analogy, in *The Songs by Solomon*, no. 17, Psalms 126:5, "Those who sow in tears will reap in song"). Schiller's poem refers to friends, husbands, and wives as forming "one soul" in communion with the Creator ("Do you sense the Creator, World?"). Humanity unites in a glorious pantheistic embrace ("Be intertwined, millions"; Example 5).



Example 5

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN, Symphony no. 9, Opus 125 (1822–24), *Ludwig van Beethovens Werke. Vollständige kritisch durchgesehene überall berechtigte Ausgabe*, Leipzig 1862–88, 25 vols., Ser. I, no. IX, fourth movement (soprano, section Allegro energico, mm. 24–28).

On the words "stands before God" (Example 6a), "Seek Him above the starry firmament! Above the stars he must dwell" (6b), "A kiss of the whole world" (6c), "Your charms reunite them" (6d), and "joy, the beautiful spark of God" (6e), the music approaches, or turns about, or emphatically settles on a".

The last poem in *The Songs by Solomon* has always been the most difficult to understand and, as a result, has been either brushed off as a secular wedding hymn, rather extraneous to the collection of otherwise standard liturgical texts, or more often blatantly ignored. Yet it represents the very essence of the collection, which explains its culminating position. The 'sacred wedding' is what *The Songs by Solomon*, after Solomon's Song of Songs, is about: humans who pray to God, sing hymns to Him, glorify Him, rejoice in Him as a bridegroom in a bride, and rise to join Him.

(a) *ff* steht vor Gott, vor Gott, vor Gott. (b) *pp* *cresc.* Such' ihn ü - ber'm
(c) *f* Ster - nen - zelt! Ü - ber Ster - nen muß er woh - nen Kuß der gan - zen
(d) Welt, der gan - zen Welt! der gan - zen
(e) *f* Welt! Dei - ne Zau - ber, dei - ne Zau - ber bin - den wie - der, dei - ne
Zau - ber Freu - de schö - ner Göt - ter - fun - ken! schö - ner Göt - ter - fun - ken!

Example 6

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN, Symphony no. 9, fourth movement (soprano, section Allegro assai, mm. 89–94; Andante maestoso, mm. 46–53; Allegro energico, mm. 60–75; Allegro ma non tanto, mm. 20–26; Prestissimo, mm. 55–62).

We are made privy to the secret message behind *The Songs by Solomon* in the late thirteenth-century *Book of the Zohar*:

"I am my beloved's, His desire is upon me" [Sg-Sgs 7:11]. In all the days of being bound to this world I was bound in a single bond with the Holy One, Blessed be He, which is why "His desire is upon me!"...Until now these words were covered, for I was afraid to reveal them: now they have been revealed...I see the Holy One, Blessed be He, and all the righteous...rejoicing in this, my wedding celebration! All of them are invited, in another world, to my wedding celebration! Happy is my portion!¹⁸

18. *Sefer ha-Zohar* (ca. 1280), ed. REUVEN MARGALIOU, III, 4th edition, Jerusalem 1964, fols. 288a, 291a–b.