

ROBERT SIROTA

COMPOSER

PROGRAM NOTES

HAFEZ SONGS

Program note by Robert Sirota:

For this song cycle I have chosen four poems by the great 14th century Persian Sufi poet Hafez. These poems are *ghazals*, a form of lyric poetry common to the Persian court of this time period. This genre has some similarities to the western sonnet, both in form (both make use of rhyming couplets) and subject matter - mortality, sacred and sensual love – and both make abundant use of images from the natural world. Indeed, Shakespeare seems to echo Hafez two centuries later:

*Speak Hafez! On the world's page trace
Your poem's narrative;
The words your pen writes will have life
When you no longer live.*

*So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

Shakespeare, Sonnet 18

or

*You are why Hafez lives –
But now, within your heart,
Prepare to say farewell,
Since he too must depart.*

*This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more
strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.*

Shakespeare, Sonnet 73

The four *ghazals* that I have set all employ the Persian garden, and more specifically, the gardens of Shiraz, as a central metaphor, an earthly paradise which mirrors and presages heaven. The rich imagery used includes water, wind, flowers (rose, jasmine, narcissus, anemone), the nightingale, and wine.

These poems simultaneously juxtapose a world-weary fatalism with a mystical and ecstatic longing for heaven. I have chosen to express this duality by setting the poet's words for two voices - the poet in conversation with himself.

I am grateful to the eminent poet and translator Dick Davis for permission to use his straightforward no-nonsense English renditions of these poems, which maintain the metric and rhyming structure of the original Farsi while employing simple contemporary English.

And finally, my deep gratitude to Marie Williams, for suggesting this project, and for her indomitable spirit and enthusiasm.