

*Helen Leneman***Ruth and Boaz Love Duets as Examples of Musical Midrash**.....
résumé

L'auteur a étudié douze opéras et oratorios basés sur le livre de Ruth. Certains livrets mettent en exergue la relation entre Ruth et Noémi; d'autres privilégient les rapports entre Ruth et Booz. Les compositeurs renforcent ces options au moyen de diverses techniques musicales.

La thèse de cet article défend l'idée que la musique peut être considérée comme une forme de "midrash" car elle récrit l'histoire dans un autre langage. La musique a le pouvoir de lire entre les lignes et d'insérer dans le récit le monde intérieur du cœur et de l'esprit. Alors que les livrets comblent les lacunes narratives du récit original, la musique évoque les sentiments et les réactions des personnages.

L'introduction d'un rapport amoureux entre Ruth et Booz représente une transformation importante caractérisant plusieurs oeuvres inspirées du livre de Ruth. Dans les duos d'amour entre Ruth et Booz, le langage musical se déploie en complément du langage littéraire. Comme l'auteur l'explique dans son article, la musique exprime davantage la passion que l'argument du récit. L'analyse musicale de l'auteur donne une idée de la signification de la musique, même si les lecteurs n'ont peut-être pas la possibilité de l'écouter.

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Music and midrash have both been strong currents in the stream of Jewish culture and thought for over two millennia. Therefore it was natural for me as a cantor and musician working in the field of biblical scholarship to see interesting possibilities in combining these two currents, in the process creating a new branch of that stream.

In this paper, both music and librettos are treated as midrash (creative re-telling) of the book, or Scroll, of Ruth. The Scroll of Ruth has the feeling of a play, making it very adaptable to librettos and musical representation. These re-tellings are "musical midrash," because they re-tell all or part of the story by creating a particular mood or feeling musically. The re-telling is in both the altered text and in the language of music. How the music is used to breathe life into the text will be understood on a more

technical level by the musician than the biblical scholar, but both groups will learn to read between the lines and find new and interesting possibilities there.

The Ruth-Boaz relationship is depicted in chapter 2.8-14 and 3.6-15 of the Scroll. In the first encounter, Boaz gives Ruth instructions related to her gleaning; she expresses gratitude for his kindness; Boaz explains that he knows all she has done for her mother-in-law and expects God to repay her; and she once again expresses her gratitude. He displays further kindness to her at mealtime. Their second encounter, in chapter 3, is on the threshing floor, and one of the largest of many narrative gaps in the story is what happened there. How much is the reader supposed to read between the lines?

Expressions like “lie down,” “to know,” and uncovering the legs, are all well-known biblical euphemisms for sexual relations. Yet later readers really cannot know if the language used in that scene would have been less or more ambiguous in an earlier era. Possibly the writer thought the action was so obvious that there was no gap at all. Some librettists and composers read this scene on the most obvious level, as a love scene, and depicted it accordingly. When performance is the final goal, there is less interest in subtlety.

I have studied and analyzed 12 nineteenth- and twentieth-century oratorios, cantatas, and operas based on the Scroll of Ruth. Finding true “love duets” between Ruth and Boaz only in the twentieth-century works was a surprise. I had a preconception that in the earlier period, the “romance” would be of greater interest than in a later period, while in fact, the interest in the Ruth-Naomi relationship is virtually equal to the Ruth-Boaz one in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth-century works, love duets appear in four of the six works I studied, while in the nineteenth century, though Ruth-Boaz duets appear in several works, none would truly qualify as an expression of love between the two.

In spite of the label “Romantic” for the late nineteenth century, the reluctance in that era to create a love story might stem from a traditionalist view of, and respect for, biblical writings. It also implies a desire to stay close to the traditional interpretation of Boaz’s actions as acts of *hesed* rather than passion or self-interest – although the twentieth-century librettos found ways to suggest both motivations. Librettos (the “script” based on the story, to which the music is set) that include a love story between Ruth and Boaz not found in the original biblical story are in a sense reading against the grain. If Boaz saves Ruth out of love for her, it is no longer a noble or self-sacrificing act. These re-

tellings will challenge traditional interpretation and may steer many readers away from the main stream of traditional reading onto this new branch.

Why music? My thesis is that music can be considered midrash because it retells the story in a different language. One of the original roles of midrash was to fill in narrative gaps. The first gap music fills for the listener, before even considering the librettos, is that of character and age. Both character and age are suggested by voice type and the range utilized within that voice. *Voice type* refers to the range of a singer's voice, which is closely linked to the style and emotional content of a character's music. The lowest woman's voice is contralto, followed by alto, mezzo-soprano, and soprano. For men it is bass, baritone, tenor. The timbre, or quality, of a voice is closely linked to that voice's range. There are norms governing the choice of voice type for a given role. A bass or alto voice has a mellow, rich sound, and is usually chosen for an older character, while a tenor or soprano would usually be the choice for a younger person. These are all examples of music as midrash, since the voice type immediately suggests a character's age even when this is not found in the original text.

Of the 12 works I analyzed, there were only three exceptions to the casting of Ruth as a light soprano (signifying her relative youth and innocence). Naomi's part is normally set for either alto, mezzo, or contralto. Boaz is variably a bass, baritone, or tenor. Baritone is a higher and more flexible voice than bass; bass invariably stands for maturity and authority, while baritone can also have a romantic timbre, as tenor almost always does. There is not much correlation between these voice types and the element of love interest in individual works; in other words, even if Boaz is a bass and therefore an older and socially superior man, he might still express passion for Ruth.

In nineteenth-century operatic tradition, the romantic leads are normally taken by a tenor and soprano. The light soprano voice, in addition to standing for youth, may also imply a relatively passive character. This may have been one motivation for the composers who cast Ruth this way. In my view, Ruth is an ambiguous character because her speech is both less frequent and more cryptic than either Naomi's or Boaz's. Although she seems to have initiative, her initiative is usually a response to other characters in the story.

Unlike other prominent biblical women – Sarah (Genesis 12.14), Rebecca (Genesis 26.7), Rachel (Genesis 29.17), Abigail (1 Samuel 25.3), Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11.2), Esther (Esther 2.7) – Ruth is not described as either beautiful, wise, or intelligent. The

reader knows her only through her actions and, even more, her words. Ruth's speech and actions show her to be both independent and strong-willed, starting with her determination to follow Naomi, for unknown motives. This is the most striking example in the Scroll of decision-making, which reveals a character's values. It establishes Ruth as a woman with a mind of her own right from the start of the story. Ruth's decision is a one-time action which may or may not reflect constant qualities; theoretically it could suggest Ruth is a risk-taker in general, since she did also marry an Israelite.

Ruth's speech is at the center of chapters 1-3. In chapter 1, she proclaims her determination to follow Naomi (1.16-17); in chapter 2, she speaks to Boaz in a very different, submissive voice (2.13). In chapter 3, her determination is visible again in her very direct speech to Boaz (3.9b). Some of Ruth's speech appears to indicate deliberate manipulation of language to make a certain impression. The portrait of Ruth that ultimately emerges, through her speech, is that of a strong-minded woman who knows how to appear compliant while silently working towards her own goals. The medium of music is particularly well adapted to depicting Ruth's inward thoughts and emotions as distinct from her outward actions and words. But the subtlety of manipulative language is difficult to depict musically.

There are two languages in the Ruth-Boaz love duets: the musical and the textual. The music expresses various degrees of love and passion. But the librettists' reticence to place Ruth and Boaz's feelings in a world too far removed from their biblical context led the music to almost contradict what the text is saying. The use of either Song of Songs verses or biblical-sounding language in these four duets places the Ruth-Boaz relationship within a biblical context. The librettist and composer are almost telling two different stories, and the listener will respond to the emotion expressed in the music differently than the reader of the libretto. Unfortunately, the readers of this article are not hearing the music. Those with some musical knowledge will glean a notion of the sound of the music through the analytical musical notations. But in the end, the response to a musical work is in the hearing.

The works to be discussed in this paper are:¹

Noemi e Ruth, Poema Biblico (Italian), 1908

Libretto by Saverio Fino

Giocondo Fino (1867-1950, Italian)

Ruth, Oratorio (German, English), 1909

Text by the composer, based on the Bible

Georg Schumann (1866-1952, German)

Ruth, Biblical Opera in Two Acts and Seven Scenes (Hebrew), 1949

Libretto by I.L. Wohlman

Joseph Rumshinsky (1881-1956, American)

Ruth: An Opera in Three Scenes (English), 1956

Libretto by Eric Crozier

Lennox Berkeley (1903-1989, British)

Giocondo Fino

Giocondo Fino (b. 1867, d. 1950), an Italian composer, studied oriental languages and theology (he was a priest) before turning to music. In addition to *Ruth*, Fino also wrote a version of the biblical story of Deborah a year earlier (1907). He wrote several operas for the theatre and some liturgical works (*Enciclopedia della Musica* vol. 2: 198).

Though written in 1908, stylistically this work is late Romantic. Calling the work a “Poema Biblico,” a “biblical poem,” gave the author licence to create a sort of midrash in verse. Saverio Fino, the librettist, was born in 1888 and may have been related to Giocondo. As a completely original libretto, and an opera, this work could be virtually secular (in spite of the fact that the composer was a priest). Most references to God occur in the lengthy love duet, possibly to place their love in another realm. There is a mystical element to the Ruth-Boaz relationship, which inspires a sense of spiritual mystery and awe. This may have been Fino’s understanding of the biblical story; or, the librettist and composer knew what would make the story of *Ruth* interesting and appealing for the audience of their place and time.

The most frequent musical device found in this opera is that of the curving and arching melody. Voices swoop up and down in a kind of musical arc at every emotional point in the libretto – which happens in almost every scene. Other devices seen elsewhere but used in a more extreme way in this work, include vocal leaps and constantly unsettled harmony and rhythm. The love duet is the musical highlight of the work, containing some of its most beautiful melodies.

The libretto reads almost like a novel because of the extensive descriptive “stage directions,” long narrative accounts, some of which are reproduced here. The libretto was published separately from the score; those parts of the libretto analyzed separately from the music will be notated by the libretto page number. Most of the commentary on the action is from the libretto, so these passages are in quote marks [translations all mine]. In this opera, Ruth is a soprano and Boaz a baritone. Though Boaz is referred to as an old man, this does not affect the degree of passion expressed in the love duet with Ruth.

The Ruth-Boaz scene opens with these words in the libretto: “Ruth, who is lying at Boaz’s feet in the vast plain, knows she is obeying mysterious laws, and waits for the sky to signal her new mission.” She says:

There is peace and turmoil in this silent waiting!

“Boaz awakens with a start and sees the woman at his feet. He immediately imagines a diabolic temptation and is afraid of it” (p. 17):

Oh terror, a woman lying at my feet; or is it a demon wrapping my heart in its spell? Who are you?

“Ruth immediately gets up, and is on her knees before the old relative. Her voice is humble and supplicant”:

Servant to my lord, I gathered stalks in the field, but not for myself, and Naomi wants her progenitor.. I pray you wrap me in your cloak, accept me, if the relationship is legal in your eyes...

These verses are based loosely on 3.9, but in the Scroll there is no reference to Naomi. Here Ruth is clearly motivated only by Naomi’s needs. Boaz continues:

O daughter, your piety is blessed in heaven, for youthful ardor did not burn in your heart; and the honest ward of your relative, heavy with years, you have elevated with prayer.

Boaz does not invoke God’s name to bless Ruth here in the Scroll, otherwise the verses are similar to 3.10. But what is barely suggested in the Scroll about the relative age

difference between the two is overt here. In several references to his age, Boaz is called the “old relative,” “heavy with years,” and as having “paternal gentleness.”

Nonetheless, a lengthy love duet follows, so Boaz may be depicted as old, but certainly not as decrepit.

The libretto continues: “In the mystery of the hour, an almost supernatural spell can be felt surrounding these two. Boaz pulls Ruth towards him with paternal gentleness and consoles her.”

These narrative descriptions may be intended to alert the reader not to visualize this scene as sexual.

I have chosen several passages from the lengthy love duet that follows. The lyrics throughout are highly poetic and filled with imagery and metaphors.

Boaz sings:

Woman, your soul was pure as a lily at dawn which opens candidly and tenderly to the sky and thus does your heart, equally pure, open up.

Though no part of this libretto is biblical, references to Song of Songs can be detected in some of the vocabulary: for instance, “lily” appears twice in that text (Song of Songs 2.1, 2). Other, later librettists take or adapt verses from Song of Songs for this love duet, probably feeling that this raises the expressions of love to a higher level. Other possible reasons for the use of this text will be discussed below.

This section opens on a relatively high pitch for a baritone. It ends calmly, one octave lower. The high opening note, coupled with the poetic language, immediately portray Boaz as a more lyrical and passionate figure than a bass Boaz would be, in spite of his age indicators in the libretto.

Ruth continues “with ingenuous abandon”:

Oh, the heart is like a cloud (haze) that trails along, that evaporates over the mountain, and seems like a silver veil for the firmament.

This section (p. 144, reh. #29), marked *molto espressivo* (very expressive), begins with an octave leap, after which the key shifts to D-flat major, a relatively complex key, sometimes called the “luxurious key” (Cooke 1959: 175). The rhythm changes to 4/4, a

broader time, with the accompaniment under Ruth's flowing melody *arpeggios* in the bass, while the higher parts of the orchestra double Ruth's voice. The tune is full of vocal leaps (p. 145, m.5 from reh. #29). These leaps, coupled with the harmonic shifts, are musical indicators of great excitement. The choice of the luxurious D-flat major adds passion to the music.

Later in the duet (p. 48, top), Ruth sings:

Now God hears us ...

This phrase, marked *rallentando molto* (much slower) is in C major. Over an accompaniment of steadily ascending *arpeggios*, Ruth sings a startling leap of a ninth from *g'* to *a'*. The orchestra echoes the vocal leap in the "luxurious" key, D-flat major. The unexpected C major, large vocal leap, and return to D-flat major, all depict the height of excitement and even ecstasy. As the phrase descends, Boaz enters, continuing the descending cadence (p. 148, 1 measure after reh. #31). "Boaz detects in Ruth the delicate memory of her widowhood as she continues":

I hear with trembling the voice of love that touches lightly, but does not dare..

Boaz responds:

Timid one, listen, and repeat: Wife..

The libretto describes the scene: "A force, almost a spell, has now taken hold of and linked these two souls. They have met in the purity of dreams and ideals, and they see nature almost transformed before their eyes, creating around them the joy of an earthly paradise. In this ascent of their souls towards simplicity and love, they are accompanied by the mysterious smiles of all the forces that live in universal nature, and in that smile of the universe they completely abandon themselves as in a marvelous vision."

The librettist makes it very clear that this is not a simple love story between two mortals; there is a pure and mystical aspect to their love, which would contradict a more earthly or sexual element. Notably absent in this lengthy scene between Ruth and Boaz is any actual blending of the voices. One of them will occasionally imitate a melody or theme first introduced by the other. But there is no "coming together" vocally, a musical way of keeping them physically apart.

The libretto continues: “Ruth has abandoned herself with ingenuous enthusiasm to the effusion of love she feels flowering in her soul ... while Boaz has fallen to his knees with his forehead to the ground in adoration. In the sky a star passes which wrings a cry from the woman. Boaz is called back to life with that cry. He asks Ruth if she heard a voice in the heavens.” She answers:

In the heavens was an infinity of stars, and one shone on my hills, alive, then quickly fell on your fields.

But Boaz, still seeing the vision from before, says:

On the indolent cry a hymn arose, God sought and God prayed: let the dewy heavens rain [bring forth] a righteous man, o Lord...But it was beyond the heavens that God shone light, and God spoke the Word to the universe beyond the heavens, saying: “He will come.”

God’s name has been mostly absent from this libretto, but now that the final scene approaches, God is given a role. Near the start of this duet, it was clear that there was a mystical aspect to the feelings between Ruth and Boaz. Here there is also a hint of a messianic vision on Boaz’s part. As the libretto describes, “Boaz searches the sky as if awaiting the Messiah promised and prophesied to the Israelites; he almost seems to understand that the Messiah will come out of his lineage, and he exults. Ruth, on the other hand, not being Israelite, feels only love.”

The implication of this comment is that both as a female and a Moabite, Ruth’s integration will never be complete. This closing scene depicts a Ruth that remains outside the world of Boaz and Naomi.

Ruth continues:

The Moabite heard no word but yours alone, and fascinated, she sealed it in her heart, smiling again at the reflowering of love.

This is the only time Ruth refers to herself as Moabite, implying that she feels more like an outsider than she has before. She also is depicted as accepting her inferior position. Thus, Ruth emerges as a less ambivalent and more passive character than her biblical counterpart at the hands of this male Italian librettist.

In a sense, Fino is reading both traditionally and non-traditionally. He has added a love interest not found in the Scroll, yet the sense of mystery and awareness of God he has injected into this love transmits the idea these two had no choice. They are totally guided by God, not by earthly passion. They seem less flesh and blood characters in the text they sing than in the music to which they sing it.

Georg Schumann

Georg Schumann (b. 1866, d.1952), a German composer, was the director of the Berlin *Singakademie* from 1900-1950. He conducted the final twentieth-century performance of his *Ruth* in 1946, just six years before his death. The work was revived and performed at the Berlin Philharmonic on 4 November 2003, a performance I attended.

Schumann's harmonic style falls on the border between the late Romantic and early twentieth-century. His libretto is a mix of extended biblical passages – notably Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs – with “biblicized” passages blended in. The text found in the orchestral score includes the original German and an English translation by John Bernhoff, while the piano/vocal score has English only, an “adaptation” by Henry G. Chapman. This is the text I am using.

Schumann's style includes unusual intervals and dissonances; dramatic climaxes, often with high sung notes; syncopated rhythms to create excitement; effective use of silence, with sustained rests; and interesting tonal painting through pitch. The unusual instrumentation, including harp, drums, and tambourine, lend a Middle Eastern flavor to the score.

Schumann uses leitmotifs throughout. Leitmotifs are recurring musical phrases used as symbols, as musical reminders, and for musical unification. Most notable is the “Whither thou Goest” motif, which opens the entire work in the clarinets, is repeated in the strings, and then re-appears frequently throughout the oratorio.²

There are two Ruth-Boaz duets in this work, though the first one does not really qualify as a love duet except that both Boaz and later Ruth confess to having felt love at this first meeting. When they meet in the field, Boaz tells Ruth that he knows full well what she has done. Part of his response is sung to the melody of the Ruth leitmotif, musically linking the destinies of the three main characters. Boaz gives instructions to the reapers

(2.15) in very pompous music, which gives Boaz an air of importance and power. The range of his music in this scene is quite low, ranging from F# to e. The remainder of the scene summarizes the action of chapter 2. At the scene's conclusion, a male chorus sings a hymn-like and tonic melody accompanied by harp, while Boaz sings over them (in music marked *molto espressivo*):

O my God, what seed hast thou sown here in my heart! O Lord, whose mercy knoweth no end.

The metaphor of seed sown can refer to either love he is already feeling for Ruth, or the seed that will be planted from their coming together. Either way, Boaz experiences it as something coming from God, which places his love on a higher plane.

In the next scene between Ruth and Naomi, Ruth passionately professes her love for Boaz, after which Naomi gives her instructions for approaching him. Before doing so, Ruth intones a prayer to God, making her a more pious figure than she is in the biblical original. After she tells Boaz her purpose in coming, he responds:

May the Lord now bless thee, o my daughter. All that thou couldst give hast thou given, what thou givest is great as thou are faithful (paraphrased 3.10).

After Ruth responds, Boaz continues (p. 141, reh. #60):

Is not a virtuous woman most precious, and her price above rubies? (Prov. 31.10). Hast ravished my heart, my sister and my spouse. Tell me, how foundest thou the way to me? (Song of Songs 4.9, KJV)

The Song of Songs verses are sung as an unaccompanied recitative, followed by Ruth's leitmotif in the orchestra, played *adagio con espressione*, over drums. Ruth responds after this short orchestral Interlude (p. 143, reh. #62):

I slept but my heart kept watch. Then I arose and went about the city, to seek for him whom my soul loveth. I sought him, but I found him not; I called, but he answer'd me not. The watchmen that go about the city found me, to whom I said, have ye not seen him, whom my soul loveth? (Song of Songs 3.1-3).

This section begins as a quasi-recitative and with a few rare tonic moments – for example, E and G major are clearly heard (m.1, 3, 5 after reh. #62, reh. #63). There is a feeling of calm but from the phrase “I sought him” (p. 143, 3rd staff, m.3), the rhythm becomes slightly more agitated. Harp is included in the accompaniment. The opening of this scene, when Boaz notices Ruth and flutes play high cadences, musically portrays excitement and mystery. The predominance of the harp throughout seems fitting for a setting of Song of Songs, possibly because of its association with the biblical David (which indirectly suggests Ruth as well). Boaz continues (p. 144, reh. #64):

What is thy love above another? O thou fairest, fairest of women! O my beloved, thou are fair as the rose of Sharon, as the lily of the valleys.

These verses are based on Song of Songs 2.1, where they are spoken by the woman, in first person. The Song of Songs verses throughout the duet express love and desire within a biblical context, on the simplest level. But this biblical book has traditionally been interpreted allegorically as well, in an attempt to understand its inclusion in the canon when it appears to be a highly sensual and erotic poem. As an allegory, it has been interpreted as the love between God and his bride Israel (Hosea 1-2; Jeremiah 2.2; 3. 1-13; Isaiah 50.1; Ezekiel 16, 23). In early Christian interpretation (Origen, Jerome, Augustine), the poem was interpreted allegorically as representing the love of Christ for his Church. So all of these levels of interpretation are associated with the poem, and its extensive use here could be recalling any or all of the associations, suggesting more than one dimension to the love being expressed. On the other hand, because the woman’s verses in Song of Songs suggest a sexually open and forward woman, these verses used here could also be interpreted as an attempt to portray Ruth as this kind of woman.

Ruth responds:

Tell me whither is my beloved turned aside? (Song of Songs 6.1; p.146, top)

Boaz:

As a lily among thorns, so is my beloved among the daughters. (Song of Songs 2.2; p. 146, reh. #66)

Ruth:

I charge you, ye watchmen of the town, tell my beloved if you find him, that I am sick of love (Song of Songs 5.8).

Boaz:

Lovely and fair is thy face, thy voice is sweetness. Fair as the rosy morning, and set apart like the sun are thou. O hark to the voice of thy beloved (mixed and combined verses from Song of Songs).

Ruth:

I hear his voice, my beloved is mine, and I am his (Song of Songs 2.16).

This is the only moment the two voices come together and “touch.” Ruth’s word “his” (p. 148, 3rd staff) is sung on a *d'*, rising to *d'♯* on the third beat; and on this beat, Boaz enters on a *g*, an octave and augmented fifth lower, creating a suspension. Boaz’s music in this duet is soaring, and in a much higher register than in the previous scene: the range is up to *e'flat* and hovers around *c'*. Both vocally and textually, this is a very different Boaz from the one portrayed earlier. This effective musical device for depicting character development is found in few of the works based on *Ruth* that I have studied. The high range depicts ardor, though somewhat suppressed as expressed musically by the separation between their voices, which only blend for an instant in the entire duet. Boaz continues:

Now arise and come, and follow me. Thou hast ravished my heart my sister, o my sister and my spouse. Kiss me, o my spouse, with the kisses of thy mouth, love (Song of Songs 1.6, 2.13 and other verses; p. 149, reh. #69).

The phrase “Kiss me” is to be sung *ff* and *molto espressivo e con moto* (very loud, expressive, and quickly). It starts on *c'*, rising to *c'♯* and *d'*, before dropping and rising chromatically to *c'♯* again (p. 149, 3rd-4th staves). As the duet builds to a climax, these ascending chromatic lines sung at the top of the baritone register seem to convey ecstasy. The top note is held for five beats before abruptly dropping to *d♯*. After the buildup, the sudden drop of the voice, which is almost cut off, makes it easy to visualize the kiss that follows. The next measure is silent except for a single note in the horns, an orchestral exclamation point.

A distant horn is heard. The horn solo was meant to represent the shofar, or ram's horn (Humiston 1913, program notes). The priest greets the rising sun, from a distance:

O give thanks unto the Lord.

Ruth says to Boaz:

Hearst thou the matin song of the priests? Let me now go from thee, that none may know that a woman came here to the floor.

This text is based on 3.14, but there Boaz thinks this, it is not spoken. Boaz doesn't want her to go; he wants to tell everyone he is taking her to wife. They kiss again. In the next and final scene, entitled "Morning dawn," a chorus of priests and people sing a psalm of thanks to God. As Ruth and Boaz sing more love verses, the chorus continues singing praises to God in the background. The libretto retains the language of the KJV Bible for non-biblical verses throughout this scene.

Boaz sings (marked *adagio con molta passione*):

How shall I forsake thee? For neither flood can quench nor many waters drown the tender love I bear thee! Then come, beloved, enter into my father's house; thy shepherd I; build thou me up a goodly home (Song of Songs 8.7).

Ruth:

Since thou dost now thy face radiant and full of grace, with smiles to me uncover, hailing my sun I cry: henceforth, 'tis day for aye, night is for ever over. Ah, would that a thousand tongues had told thee! Ah had I a thousand arms to enfold thee, I'm drawn unto thee, as a ship to the ocean, I'm borne unto thee as the arrow speedeth to thee.

As Ruth and Boaz sing these rapturous love verses, the chorus continues singing psalms to God under them.

Boaz:

Pour now thy goodness on me, and bring into my dwelling place the ray of thy resplendent light.

Ruth:

When in that paradise I shall have found me, then may the sun for ever shine on thee! And if with glory his radiance surround me, I'll walk in the light henceforth from darkness free. For love is strong as death (Song of Songs 8.6; the chorus joins in on this last verse).

In Ruth's final phrase, her music soars to *b'' flat*, never to the high *c''* it seems to anticipate. The chorus closes with:

O give thanks unto the Lord our God.

Schumann, like Fino, has written a passionate love duet for Ruth and Boaz. But through similar and even more extensive use of passages from Song of Songs in his libretto, he too may be trying to adhere to a more traditional reading while injecting non-traditional additions. While passionate love is expressed in the music, the libretto seems to suggest this love belongs to another plane. On the other hand, Schumann may have been attempting to put a name and face on the nameless lovers who express their passion in the Song of Songs.

Joseph Rumshinsky

Joseph Rumshinsky's (b. 1881, d. 1956) first music studies, in Vilna, Russia (now Lithuania), were with a cantor and at music conservatories. Rumshinsky traveled around Eastern Europe from 1890-1894, accompanying a number of cantors and studying music, with noted composer Rimsky-Korsakov among others (Obituary, New York Herald, 2/6/56). On this trip, he first encountered Yiddish theater, and in 1896 wrote his first composition, "Mizrekh Klagen" ("Eastern Sounds"), a waltz. At this time, he familiarized himself with the works of Haydn, Handel and Mendelssohn and other, lesser-known composers. These early influences would become important for Rumshinsky's later work. He was brought to the United States in 1904 by Yiddish actor Jacob P. Adler, and within a few years Rumshinsky had revolutionized the Yiddish musical stage in New York (New York Herald 1956).

During the 1910's Rumshinsky was amazingly productive, averaging over 20 compositions per year. He wrote a setting of *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs) in 1913, the same year he also wrote a musical revue called *Di Amerikanerin* ("The American Woman/Girl"). He worked with virtually everyone in the community of Yiddish theater, and by 1920, Rumshinsky had established himself as the preeminent composer of the Yiddish theater, becoming the composer and conductor of the Second Avenue Theater (Rumshinsky archives, UCLA Music Library). In the course of his long career, he wrote about 250 musicals, and introduced a major change in these musicals by placing them in a full symphonic setting (Obituary, New York Times, 2/7/56).

The opera *Ruth* was his last work. Rumshinsky's dream of seeing this work performed on stage in Israel was never realized, as he died in the midst of negotiating for this production. Later attempts to see it staged in Los Angeles all failed (Rumshinsky archives, UCLA Music Library). He had intended to orchestrate it (personal communication with his daughter Betty Fox), and made a few instrumental notations in the piano score to which I will occasionally refer. Unlike the majority of musical settings of *Ruth*, the part of Ruth is taken by a dramatic rather than lyric soprano, and Boaz is sung by a tenor rather than the more common bass or baritone. These voices are typical for the romantic roles of grand opera, being suited to passionate and dramatic music. Because of the casting in this opera, Ruth and Boaz both emerge as more assertive and passionate than in other works.

Musically this is a very unusual work. Modality features significantly, probably a result of Rumshinsky's early training in Eastern Europe, as well as his many years writing for Yiddish theatre. That music would also have incorporated modal sounds. In addition to modality, Rumshinsky uses chromaticism and dissonance very effectively to heighten dramatic moments.

In this work, there is no duet between Ruth and Boaz when they first meet in the second scene. Yet in the third scene, when Naomi tells Ruth she must be tired from gleaning, Ruth answers: [translations all mine]

I didn't tire, because I loved, oh how I loved ... I love Boaz, I only thought to glean in his field. He said nothing of his love for me but the burning irises of his eyes have become the dream of my life, and all the parts of his body and movement of his height and strength spoke of his love, without saying it.

In this midrashic re-telling, Ruth has fallen in love with Boaz, and this is no elderly man as some rabbinic midrashists have suggested, but rather a tall, strong, and presumably virile one. And based on his body language, Ruth assumes he returns her love. The inclusion of a physical description underlines the importance of the visual element in this work, meant to be performed onstage by singers who could convincingly play these roles as written here.

In the next scene, at the threshing floor, Ruth enters and prays to the God of Israel for strength and courage. Like Fino, Rumshinsky is portraying a more pious Ruth, perhaps to temper the expressions of passion that follow. When she lies at Boaz's feet and he awakens, she identifies herself and sings:

I hurried to come and ask something of the judge.

Boaz answers:

I am indeed a judge in Israel; what is your question?

This addition makes Boaz sound more like a judge than a lover; he does not take on the role of judge in the Scroll until chapter 4. Ruth continues (p. 248, last measure):

My husband Mahlon died in the land of Moab, and he had no sons to carry his name for his inheritance, so that his name should not be erased...so if I have pleased you, my lord, please spread your wings over your handmaid (3.9) so the name of the deceased should not be erased from Israel, for you are the redeemer (3.9)

Ruth is spelling out what she wants from Boaz much more explicitly here than in the Scroll, where Ruth never mentions Mahlon's name. In the Scroll, Boaz mentions Mahlon's name in 4.9-10, where he explains how taking Ruth as his wife will perpetuate his name. In other words, in this libretto Ruth's words to Boaz pre-empt his speech to the whole community. This Ruth is more assertive and articulate than her biblical counterpart.

This section, to be sung *ff* and *con furioso* [sic], lies in a high vocal range, with several *a'' flats and an a''*, and most notes above *f''*. This range might obscure some of the text. Ruth's final words, "ata hagoeil" ("you are the redeemer"), are sung twice, over a

tremolo accompaniment. The key modulates unexpectedly to G major for Boaz's entrance (p. 250, last measure):

You are blessed to God my daughter, do not fear, I will do all you asked (based on 3.10-11).

The opening word takes the voice to *g'*, taking advantage of the optimum range for a tenor. The accompaniment is simple, repetitive high *arpeggios* which descend chromatically to a different tonality in every measure (p. 251). A very similar pattern is found in a section near the end of the opera (p. 339). Ruth proclaims her love for Boaz, and in a duet to be sung "con amore," he tells her of his own love for her (they both sing the same words; p. 255):

With all my heart I love you, and swear by God that I am the redeemer (Ruth: you are the redeemer).

Rumshinsky uses extensive chromaticism in this love duet. Boaz opens with an ascending chromatic figure; Ruth joins him on his last note and continues the ascending pattern. This pattern is repeated twice, taking Ruth to *a''* on "leiv" ("heart"). The duet continues with Ruth's entrances always "stepping on" the final notes of Boaz's phrases. Chromaticism is often used, as here, to express the most passionate feelings. Ascending chromatic lines also express eagerness, which can be seen in Ruth, who seems so eager to repeat what Boaz says that she cannot wait until he finishes.

The second part of the duet (p. 259) is accompanied initially by high *arpeggios* over sustained sung notes, the *arpeggios* dropping to a lower register while the orchestra doubles the high vocal line. Boaz sings:

Deep in my heart I buried this love. My lips are burning like coals.
I closed it in a secret place, until the love burst forth like fire. Who will calm it?
Could all the waters of the Jordan? (Song of Songs 8.6 paraphrased).

These verses, through a few key words, evoke the Song of Songs (which the composer had set to music many years earlier, in 1913). As we have seen, this is not the only libretto to use or imitate these verses for a Ruth-Boaz duet. Their love is placed on a different plane by being expressed in biblical language. In this part of the duet, the voices follow one another less; they sing together, in tonal harmony but not identical

melodic lines. In some places the voices echo each other's lines (p. 260, end-p. 261, top). The range of the duet is quite high, utilizing the tenor and soprano ranges. The key modulations are virtually hidden under the chromaticism and dissonance.

The accompaniment found at the opening of this section seems to express rapture. The effect of Ruth and Boaz singing sometimes together, sometimes apart, is of two distinct people blending their feelings. The potential of the tenor voice for expressing romantic fervor is fully utilized here. His ending note of *b'* is near the top end of the tenor range and its sound is inevitably dramatic and thrilling. The conclusion of this duet is a musical expression of ecstatic union.

The libretto includes a wedding scene, presided over by Naomi and with Ruth's active participation. This is a major change from the terse narrative of the Scroll's chapter 4. It also brings the drama full circle from the opening scene of the opera, which was also a wedding.

Ruth sings (p. 337, 3rd staff):

I wed you, Boaz, for eternity, in kindness and compassion. From the first day,
your kindness fell on me like dew.

(Ve'eirastani Boaz l'olam, b'chesed uv'rachamim, hein miyom harishon li
b'sadecha katal hirafta alai et chasdecha)

These verses recall Hosea 2.21, which are recited during traditional Jewish weddings and also during the ritual of putting on *tefillin* (phylacteries), which expresses love and faithfulness between the Jewish people and their god. This liturgical use of the verses grew from the belief that they refer to God's betrothal to Israel. Both librettist and composer were surely aware of this double allusion, and were elevating Ruth and Boaz's marriage to the realm of Israel's historic covenant with God. The earlier use of Song of Songs verses may have had similar allusions.

This, Ruth's final solo, is marked *allegretto con anima* and is marked by successively wider ascending interval leaps – a sixth, seventh, then octave. The accompaniment is a series of very rapid *arpeggios* under the soaring vocal line. The opening melody returns on the last page of this aria (p. 339); after the octave leap, *a'* to *a''* (m.4), the voice descends chromatically to finally end in one of the few clearly tonic moments, in D

major. This chromatic descent was heard earlier in Boaz's aria (p. 251), so this conclusion links the two together with the same ecstatic theme.

In spite, or because of, subtle allusions to Song of Songs, the music of this love duet expresses down-to-earth passion between Ruth and Boaz. But this is tempered by the use of verses taken from Jewish liturgy in the final wedding scene, which may be an attempt to "legitimize" their passion.

Sir Lennox Berkeley

Sir Lennox Berkeley (b. 1903, d. 1989) studied Modern Languages at Oxford, where he also took private organ lessons. He met and befriended Maurice Ravel in 1926. When Ravel looked at some of Berkeley's early scores, he encouraged him to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, which he did from 1926-1932. In 1929 he became a Roman Catholic, which "profoundly affected his life and work" (Dickinson in *New Grove* vol. 3: 360). During those years he met and befriended major composers such as Stravinsky and Poulenc. He met Benjamin Britten in 1936, and the two became both friends and musical collaborators. His friendship with Britten confirmed his interest in vocal writing, particularly opera.

Berkeley, like Britten, wrote a specific work with tenor Peter Pears in mind: the part of Boaz in *Ruth* was sung by Pears in the 1956 London premiere. *Ruth* was performed again in 1983 (concert performance, done as a "pageant" in Tewkesbury Abbey) at the Cheltenham Festival, when Berkeley was 80. It was performed at that festival again in 2003, billed as a "semi-staging;" but in reality the opera has not been fully staged since the 1950's, when it was performed several times (Peter Reynolds, personal communication). A compact disc of this work was released in 2005 on the Chandos label (Chandos 10301; Rigby, Kenny, Rutter; Tucker; Williams; City of London Sinfonia, Joyful Company of Singers, Hickox. Texts and translations into French and German).

The small chamber orchestra in this work consists of two flutes, horn, piano, percussion and strings. There is a complete break with older tradition of voice types: Naomi here is a soprano, Ruth a mezzo, Boaz a tenor. It has been suggested that this was to "avoid the conventional associations of operatic love-duets ... evoked by the combination of a soprano Ruth with a tenor Boaz" (Anthony Burton, CD liner notes, 9). Ruth as a mezzo sounds more mature and serious than a lyric soprano Ruth. In the libretto by Crozier

(who was one of Britten's librettists as well), modern text is interspersed with the biblical text (modified KJV).

The music in this opera has an ethereal, almost otherworldly sound. Many of the messages about characters' feelings are found "between the lines," in the orchestra part rather than the vocal. For this reason, a first hearing of this work might not reveal all its riches, but deeper study brings out the more interesting connections.

In a significant innovation, a hostile crowd greets the arrival of the Moabite stranger Ruth to their fields. As the hostility builds to a fury, Boaz enters and sends the crowd away. He then asks the head reaper what has happened, and the head reaper responds:

They fear her, Master, because she is a woman of another race (p. 73).

The biblical injunction against Moabites (Leviticus 23.4) could be considered the source of this xenophobia, but it is presented here in a modern guise. Boaz wants to punish the crowd, but Ruth pleads for them in a recitative (pp. 80-81):

They are like children, they fear what they don't know, hate what they cannot understand. Be merciful to them.

Then she continues (p. 81, reh. #29):

Ah, let not anger fill your eyes! Have mercy, do not punish those who fear their ancient foes. Be merciful, I beg, be wise.

Modern ideas like those expressed by Ruth are mingled in this scene with reference to biblical ideas like charity and forgiveness, possibly influenced by Berkeley's devout Catholicism (he is known to have worked very closely with Crozier on the libretto). There is probably also a socio-political element to these words, written so soon after World War II. Ruth's words are sung softly to a simple melody accompanied by soft chords in the strings. The pleading tune is repeated several times, each time at a higher starting pitch. Boaz then sings, to the same melody:

How fair this maiden and how wise in understanding, she pleads for those who prove themselves her foes.

Ruth is never described in the Scroll either as fair or wise; elsewhere, Boaz also ascribes kindness and loyalty to her, based on her actions towards Naomi. Boaz perceives a different Ruth because this entire scene places Ruth in a position to show qualities she had no chance to show in the original narrative. Berkeley and Crozier seem to be making Ruth into a Christ-like figure to underline her role in their Christian tradition as a foremother of Christ.

After Boaz recapitulates the tune just sung by Ruth, the two voices weave in and out of each other contrapuntally and also blending (p. 82, 2nd staff). The tenor range is taken advantage of in this short section, reaching *a' flat* (3rd staff, m.2), even though the effect is very different from the tenor voice in Rumshinsky. Because it was written for Peter Pears, the part is very lyrical and somewhat ethereal-sounding. It is unusual to have Ruth and Boaz singing simultaneously in a true duet. The fact that Ruth and Boaz sing together but to different tunes and words is a musical way of showing that both are lost in their own thoughts. But at the same time, the coming together of their voices indicates a closeness between them right from their first meeting. After another lengthy Ruth-Boaz duet (pp. 85-93), the scene closes with Boaz and the chorus of reapers singing together:

In Ruth and in her seed, shall Israel be blessed indeed.

This text seems out of place, depicting as it does a complete and dramatic change of attitude towards Ruth. It also certainly seems to be jumping the gun in terms of plot development. But it follows Boaz's realization of Ruth's many and special qualities, which he verbalizes as "generosity of soul..." and "noble spirit." Perhaps it is also a way of reassuring the listener by foretelling the conclusion.

In the next scene, Naomi encourages Ruth to approach Boaz, which she does as she sings (based on 3.9):

In the name of my dead husband, thy kinsman, Naomi's son, I beseech thee O my Master, Spread thy cloak upon me.

Boaz asks:

Wherefore shall I do this thing?

She responds:

That I may be thy wife. Yea, verily, that I may bring up sons unto Naomi, lest her name perish from the land and be forgotten (p. 168, top).

In the Scroll, Ruth simply informed Boaz that he was a kinsman. Here she is much more direct in stating what she wants. In another deviation from the Scroll, where she never mentions Naomi's name, she refers to Naomi twice. This text spells out the idea that Ruth's purpose is to bring up sons for Naomi, which Naomi had stated earlier. This idea is never stated outright in the Scroll, where it is a result but not a stated aim. While Ruth sings this passage, the orchestra plays the leitmotif of Ruth's "Whither thou goest," musically suggesting that Ruth's dedication to Naomi is her primary motive in approaching Boaz.

A sudden, loud dissonant chord introduces Boaz's dramatic response; entering on a *forte g#'* (p. 168, 3rd staff, m.2):

Ah, Ruth! Thou comest in the stillness of the night, as once the angels came immeasurably bright to Jacob, father of our race. Lo here I see the clear enchanting vision of eternity that Jacob saw!

Boaz is given a more Jewish and patriarchal stamp by his reference to Jacob, and Ruth is elevated by being compared to the angels seen by Jacob (Genesis 28.12). Ruth is also called lovely, innocent, graceful, and young, qualities not assigned to her in the Scroll. The rhythm is a placid 4/4 and a piano plays the calm accompaniment. Using the piano alone here adds an intimacy that the usual orchestral accompaniment would lack. Boaz repeats the name "Ruth" twice, both times on descending fifths but the second time starting a sixth lower (p. 168, last measure, p. 169, m.2) and sung more softly than the opening phrase. Repeating "Ruth" twice is an effective way of portraying Boaz's excitement as well as tenderness, in the way the name is repeated more softly the second time.

After further dialogue, and an aria for Ruth, a soft orchestral introduction leads to the love duet, marked *espressivo*. This section opens as Boaz spreads his cloak over Ruth. Then they sing together:

Lo, my beloved, my soul's delight, to thee I give my hand. Thine shall I be eternally. My children shall arise up and call thee blessed. The fruit of thy womb shall praise thee in the gates.

The third and fourth of these verses paraphrase Proverbs 31.28, verses that praise a good wife. As in other works that also quote this proverb or verses from Song of Songs, the “biblicized” text places the story in a different realm than an ordinary love story.

The opening features triads of thirds, a significant difference from most of the score. It opens with several measures of single sustained chords in the flute section, an ethereal sound, modulating to reach a c minor chord, the home key for this section. The tonality is not sustained, but it is an interesting attempt to ground these very traditional-sounding lyrics in more traditional-sounding tonality, even if only for a few measures. The first section is a kind of round, as Ruth repeats exactly what Boaz has just sung while he continues. There is a nice musical touch on “arise,” which is sung on an ascending scale (p. 178, 2nd staff, m.2). Ruth and Boaz continue to sing separately and then come together in harmony, though not on the same lyrics until the final phrase, “shall praise thee,” sung in unison to a dotted rhythm with high *tremolo* accompaniment (p. 179, 3rd staff, m.2). It may be significant that only when they are praising God do they sing the same words at the same moment. They end on a unison G over a C major chord and rapid scale (p. 180), a very bright and upbeat conclusion.

The music of the love duet is gentle, not passionate, transmitting a sense of religiosity to the scene. So Berkeley's “love duet,” similarly to the others discussed here, suggests that their love was pure, through the use of subtle musical and textual references. Unlike the other duets examined here, this libretto does not use text from Song of Songs, but instead imitates biblical language. The use of many adjectives throughout to describe Ruth leaves less to the listener's imagination than the Scroll or other librettos.

Conclusion

There are many differences, both textual and musical, between these portrayals of Ruth and Boaz's relationship. These may reflect differences in the surrounding cultures, or degrees of audience familiarity with the story and the Bible in general. One may resonate more than the other with your own image of Ruth and Boaz. But if you have the chance to hear these musical renditions, you will never read the text in the same way again, I promise you. This is the power of music. The librettist and composer together

create a re-imagined Scroll. This double perspective gives us new and unfamiliar lenses through which to read a familiar story.

Music has the power to not only read between the lines and fill in the gaps, but to create an inner world of the heart and mind. In other words, music can suggest and evoke a gamut of emotions that transcend the text. While librettos fill in various gaps from the original story, the music continually, but wordlessly, fills in the gaps of how people are feeling and reacting. The various musical devices used to portray passion have been described in the analysis of individual duets. A common technique is the use of leitmotif. The melody of Ruth's aria heard earlier in the story, "Entreat me not," reappears in the accompaniment during her duet with Boaz in all four of these works (though more subtly in some than others). This suggests that Ruth's devotion to Naomi motivates her in the scene with Boaz, whatever her feelings for him might be. This hint, found only in the music, is a kind of subtext; as such, it surpasses what the text can transmit on its own. The subliminal message is heard and absorbed by listeners at different levels.

The musical language sung by the characters is that of the composer, and there is wide variety between composers. But in each work, the characters transcend their biblical source when they are singing, to become both intensely real and larger than reality. While the music is playing and the characters are singing, the biblical book is brought to life, one it never had before.

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¹ These and the other 8 works are discussed in depth in Helen Leneman's forthcoming book *The Performed Bible: The Story of Ruth in Opera and Oratorio* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, anticipated 2007).

² For readers interested in this composer's work, including possible future performances, the Schumann family has created a foundation, the Georg Schumann Gesellschaft, based in Berlin. Their website is www.georgschumanngesellschaft.de.

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